

1st Sunday of Advent “An Important Time for the Soul”.

Bishop Frank Schuster

Have you noticed how all the malls around the world went straight from Thanksgiving to Christmas? Instead of the green, red, and gold that you see everywhere else, your parish welcomes you with the color violet. Why? For many, violet is the color of the sky just after the darkest hour of night that offers a hint that dawn is nearing the horizon. You will also see a wreath with four candles with only one lit this weekend. This means we are clearly keeping vigil and we have several weeks to go.

You see, instead of launching straight into Christmas after Thanksgiving, we recognize there is another season in between, sometimes a forgotten season, the season of Advent. Let's reflect on two themes the Season of Advent explores. The first theme unites our hearts with the ancient Hebrews who kept vigil for centuries awaiting the coming of the Messiah. The second theme of Advent calls us all to keep vigil for the return of Jesus at the end of time when he will judge the living and the dead. Both themes say loud and clear: we are mortal, and our time is limited. We are sinners and we need a savior. We need Jesus.

You see, as we enter the holiday season filling up our plates and shopping carts with holiday treats, Jesus gives us an important perspective this time of year. Jesus says, “You must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.” St. Paul also gives us a reminder, “Brothers and Sisters you know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”. Jesus and St. Paul are challenging us to be prepared, because the end times will arrive when we least expect. Between the rush between Thanksgiving and Christmas, it is easy to forget this spiritual theme. However, when it gets down to it, why celebrate the birthday of our savior unless we know at a very deep and basic level in our heart that we in fact need saving. Advent reminds us why Christmas is important in the first place. What are some practical and simple ways we can enter more fully into this season?

My friends, I challenge us to work in time each day for prayer during this season of Advent so to not let Christmas catch us by surprise. How many years does it seem like we blink our eyes and Christmas is already here? Christmas will be so much more meaningful for all of us if we work in more time each day to contemplate the reason for the season. How we spend this additional prayer time is up to each one of us. We can spend a few minutes with the Gospel according to St. Matthew as we are going to be spending time with this Gospel throughout this new liturgical year. We gave out daily prayer books recently to help us here too.

Another option could be lighting a candle each night and perform an examination of conscience and ask for God's wisdom, mercy, and love. Sometimes what I like to do is light a candle and listen to music for a little while. There are an infinite number of ways we can spend additional time each day in prayer during this season of Advent to prepare the way for the Lord.

In fact, during the season of Advent, it wouldn't be a bad practice to perform one random act of kindness toward someone every day. For me, this is the single most effective way for spiritual growth this time year or any time of year. It could be a kind word to a neighbor, or it could be a gift to a local food bank. I personally like to perform one simple act of kindness each day so that when I go to bed, I can say, "Lord, it was a stressful day...but I did this one act of kindness for someone that only you know about." Let me tell you, that kind of prayer makes for a good night's sleep. Try it.

You see, the message this Sunday is that the Lord is coming! Jesus calls us to be prepared because he says he is going to come when we least expect. The word Advent means arrival or coming. Our very lives are therefore a vigil for the Creator of the universe who fashioned us. Our whole lives are a quest for our good and gracious God who alone can save us. Only Jesus can satisfy the yearnings of the human heart. We have lit our first candle in our church and are challenged to light a candle in our hearts. As the days get darker and darker, we are a people who see violet on the horizon. We keep watch for the light of the world and heed the Lord's invitation: be prepared!