

SECOND ADVENT  
December 06, 2009  
the Rev. Ken Kroohs

[\(Malachi 3:1-4, Canticle 4; Philipians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6\)](#)

**WAITING? or PREPARING ?**

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH ... AND THE MEDITATIONS OF  
ALL OUR HEARTS ... BE ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU \_\_\_\_  
OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER AMEN

Last week I spoke about the meaning of the season of Advent- these weeks before Christmas. I mentioned that two common themes for Advent are "holy waiting" and "preparing". To be **waiting** for Jesus to arrive and to **prepare** for Jesus to arrive.

One problem with both these images is that they suggest this is a first time meeting with Jesus ... which it is not. Even when we talk about *Jesus entering our lives in a new and special way* that is hard for us to connect with.

So I suggested thinking more of Advent as the time before a loved one comes to our home. A loved one we very much want to be in our home, and

look forward to connecting with – again. We regret NOT being in closer connection with this loved one but are very excited about the upcoming time.

If we consider advent in that manner – the time before a loved one arrives in our home, then we ask whether we are “waiting” or “preparing”. To say we are “waiting” suggests we have done all the preparation necessary. The house is clean, the kids stuff moved out of their bedroom, the food is ready, the table set ... everything is ready for the loved one.

To say we are “preparing” suggests there is still more to do. We may have done some of it, but there is still much to do. So, the question becomes: are we fully and completely ready to stand before our Lord? If so we can wait. If not, we should prepare!

Today I will focus on the personal

and inward preparation. Next week we will look outward - beyond ourselves.

For simplicity I will divide our inward and personal preparation into "worship" and "prayer". Much of worship IS prayer but in this case I am focusing on personal and individual prayer.

Today is a good day for this discussion because as a community we will experience and use three very different worship styles.

Our 9 am service is best described as a "broad church" style. In that I mean we use many symbols such as candles, vestments, processions, etc. But we don't use the most elaborate vestments, or incense, or chanting.

Our 11 am we will use a style I describe as "formal". A more common describer is "high church" but that can be used in a derogatory fashion so I will use "formal". We will use more

formal vestments, and incense and chanting, and more bells.

The beauty of this formal style is sometimes missed because we don't understand the symbolism being used. Incense for example, can be seen in at least two different ways. In Revelation the prayers of the faithful are said to rise to God's throne as incense rises. A wonderful image.

Another image from the Old Testament and the New is when God's presence is indicated by a cloud. In the Exodus "He lead them by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night". In the transfiguration, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the mountain top where a cloud envelopes them and they hear God's voice. So the cloud of incense can be understood as a symbol of God's presence.

Then at 5 pm we use a more contemporary style. It is a mix but clearly is less formal than the other two services. I designed that service

for people who did not grow up with the symbols and may not understand them. More importantly, the symbols some appreciate might be a turnoff to someone without that background.

The energy level is somewhat different in each style. The formal style tends to have a somewhat more meditative style. Certainly most the chant forms, once we know them well enough to not struggle with them - tend to help us focus. Many of the hymns used in both the broad church and formal styles are designed to teach. If you pay attention to the words of "o come, o come Emmanuel" there are a series of Sunday School lessons put to music.

Contemporary services tend to have a higher energy level. The music tends to be less "instructional" in the focus and more "spirituality" or "spirit" focused. In the manner of many religious formats the music tends to repeat a single thought or concept.

The Prayer Book has a couple different functions but one is as the guide or rule book for our church services, and all our services follow the rules. The Prayer Book is our only guide. Various scholars write down their opinions but the only rule book is the Prayer Book.

So in thinking about symbols, can anyone tell me what page are the instructions about vestments? Or candles? Or clergy shirt color? Or clergy collars? ... Answer – nowhere!

To the surprise of many people all those things people think of as Episcopalian are not required. The symbolism of me wearing a black clergy shirt in the middle of the week is that I have not done my ironing! And that's perfectly according to the rules.

You may have noticed I have not used the term "traditional" even once.

That's because there is no such thing!! What is traditional for one person is innovative for another. If you want to look at the beginning of the Anglican church, just after the split with Rome, you will find "traditional" means a service that begins with full Morning Prayer, has a sermon 3 times longer than I would dare inflict on you, and then a full communion service. No beating the Baptists to the restaurant!!

In fact the most appropriate adage is that the word "**traditional**" means how I want it done next time!! When someone says it is traditional they mean it is what they are used to and comfortable with – which does not make it better or worse than any other way.

Another reason I avoid the term "traditional" is that it has become a catch phrase for those churches moving to a very conservative stance. It is used to mean "*you will not find any gays or lesbians here!*" – but if you

listen it also means, "*no female priests and probably no female readers*", a position about divorce and remarriage similar to the Roman Catholic church - don't come for communion because if you are divorced you are not a member of this church. ... All those positions can be described as "traditional" in some places so I do not use the term if I can avoid it.

But I started out by saying we would be considering what it means to be prepared for Jesus ... prepared for the arrival of our loved one ... prepared in a personal and inward fashion.

I took all that time to discuss "worship styles" to make the point that ---- NONE OF IT MATTERS!!! At least not to God. God does not care if we use a silver cross or a wooden one. God does not care if I wear a black shirt or a blue one. God does not care which order we light the

candles. All of that is for **us** ...  
not for God.

If we wear our Sunday best to honor God that is good. If we wear our Sunday best to show off how much we can spend on a suit - that is bad. Same action, different results.

If we light the candles beginning with those closest to the cross because Jesus is the light of the world - great. If we light the candles beginning with those closest to the cross because in fourth grade we were slapped for doing something different - not good.

In fact, I argue that worship is not for God. Worship is for us. God does not grow stronger if we say certain prayers or sing certain songs. I believe God is pleased if we sincerely worship from our hearts - no matter what the style is.

I believe the key to worship is

found in Psalm 51: (paraphrased) "*You (God) do not delight in sacrifice ... (You delight) in a broken and contrite heart*" I believe worship is not about our head, but about our heart. That does NOT mean our head, our intellect, our brain does not matter.

I love the poster, it is a bit arrogant and insulting so I refuse to hang it up, but I love the one that says "*The Episcopal Church, where you leave you coat but not your brain at the door!*"

So worship is about our intellectual understanding, but it is much more about our spirit, our heart, our connection with God. Worship is like trying to explain why we love someone. We can explain why we like them - we have similar interests, etc. but love is much more difficult to explain.

The image I like the best is the young baby being held by their parent

... or now I say grandparent! ... The two are communicating through giggles and tickles, and funny sounds and rocking movements. A great deal of communication goes on that way but none of it is intellectual. Of course, in that image WE are the baby!

Again, that image is not perfect because God wants us to try and understand. But understanding works best when it begins and grows from a relationship ... a connection ... from love.

Prayer, personal and individual prayer is similar. Certainly it should include words and thoughts and praises and requests. But the heart of prayer is like snuggling with a loved one. All the rest grows best from the strength of the basic relationship.

Some people move from the intellectual to the relationship. In many ways that was my story. But it

works best once we reach the relationship level -- within which can come the intellectual.

Bottom line ... to prepare for Jesus, our loved one to enter our home ... again ... means mainly to work at getting our relationship in order. That can and should include corporate worship, group Bible study, retreats, and similar activities but ultimately they are all designed to strength our relationship with God.

Prepare ye the way for the Lord!

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