Advent is a time of preparation. The retail culture in which we live makes it difficult to ignore the preparatory character of the season – at least the preparations that include purchasing gifts, decorating houses and businesses (inside and out), cooking and baking. I suspect that many of us have some degree of love-hate relationship with these preparations – there is some level of joy in them but we also find that feeling we have to do them is unappealing.

Trying to remember that it is a time for spiritual preparation can make the season more meaningful. Let me suggest a way to do that. At some point in the next week or two, make time for a few minutes alone – no less than five, no more than fifteen. During that time consider some questions suggested by Ronald Rollheiser, one of my favorite contemporary spiritual writers.

Ask yourself: Have I lacked in love of myself or others? Have I resented correction from others – especially when that correction made it harder to get my own way? Have I been impatient with others – or subjected them to the same correction that I resent? Have I been mean-spirited about giving time to others while wasting it myself? Have I constantly given in to my desire to be comfortable without giving thought to those who can’t provide their own comfort? Have I provided only for those whom I love most or those I want most obligated to me when making holiday purchases?

All of these questions get at the ways in which we are profoundly self-focused. Inward focus is the starting point for isolation – the loneliest place in all of creation. Outward focus holds the joy and wonder of all of the fulfillment God can provide through the lips and lives of others. God’s gift of Jesus to us underscored God’s most passionate yearning – that our relationships with one another and with God be healed and reconciled from all the ways we act as though creation revolves around us.

So here are some commitments to consider alongside the questions I suggested – commitments designed to help us avoid isolation as we embrace the joy of the season: Today I will be accepting and forgiving and try to learn from anyone I encounter who confronts or challenges or criticizes me – and I will thank them for helping me see myself through eyes other than my own. When I’m filled with pride I’ll try instead to express my pride and joy in the character and accomplishments of others. I’ll work on practicing patience – especially when I realize I am feeling impatient with others. I’ll find in my minor and temporary discomforts (especially being cold or hungry) a stimulus to remember and pray for those for whom such discomforts are an unavoidable fact of life. I’ll spend at least as much of my time and resources providing for people in true need as I do on gifts for those whom I love most.

I think you’ll find that engaging these questions and commitments will make it easier to reach Christmas day feeling open to being renewed by the hope – the fresh birth of which we celebrate at Christmas – that God’s promise of forgiveness and mercy, offered in every situation even if it seems bleak or causes us pessimism – is the Christmas gift. Being able to trust that a benevolent, all-powerful God is still in charge of this world is truly priceless.

This year we are beginning the new liturgical year on December 2nd. On Dec., 9th, we will have our Annual Advent Breakfast and Annual Parish Meeting. Our Greening of the Church service will be on December 16th, the Third Sunday in Advent, with Christmas Dinner afterward. On Christmas Eve, our service will begin at 4:00 pm. The Sunday after Christmas, (Dec. 30), we will have a Feast of Lessons and Carols – a chance to enjoy many of those Christmas hymns we love to sing!