

Well, here we are, the fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday of this season of preparation. Soon, we will celebrate the biggest day of the year for the parish: Christmas. The most important day is Easter, because as important as the *birth* of Christ is, his Resurrection from the dead is the pivotal event in all of history, the day he conquered sin and death. But the day in which we, as a parish, have the greatest opportunity to reach out to those who are on the margins, those who are not sure they still believe or there is anything of value still in the Catholic faith, is Christmas. Perhaps some who feel that way are here, even today. If so, please know we are thinking about you, whether or not we know your name; we care for you and simply want you to know that you are always welcome here. We have received the revelation of God's great love for us through Jesus Christ, and we want to do everything we can to help spread that revelation to all those who are in need of hearing it.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We are still in the season of Advent, and our task is preparation. That is what Advent is about: preparing not just for the Christmas holiday when we celebrate the first coming of Christ, but preparing for his second coming, when Christ will return in glory and judge the living and the dead.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the best way to prepare ourselves for that day is by *not* focusing on ourselves. It's easy to get caught up in our own lives, our own concerns, our own struggles. If our attention is always inwards, we will not be able to follow Christ's commandments of loving God with all of our heart, and loving our neighbor as ourselves, because we won't see them. We are challenged to focus on God and neighbor, and not on ourselves. Because if we are not following Christ's commandments, we are not prepared for his return. So we should ask ourselves: Is loving God a priority in my life, and am I serving my neighbor. Praising, adoring, thanking Christ turns our attention away from ourselves and towards God. Serving others turns our attention away from ourselves and towards our neighbor. In order to prepare ourselves for Christ's return, we should spend less time focusing on ourselves.

A beautiful example and model for us of being prepared for Christ is the Virgin Mary, to whom the Church turns every year on the fourth Sunday of Advent. After preparing her heart to receive the word of God through the angel Gabriel and responding that God's will be done in her life, what does she do? She turns her attention to her cousin Elizabeth. She had just conceived the messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. One wouldn't fault her taking a "me day," but that's not what our mother does. She travels in haste to the hill country, and takes care of her

cousin Elizabeth, making sure that her needs are met rather than focusing on her own.

And in the process of taking care of her cousin, Mary also makes Jesus known to her. She carries with her Jesus in her womb, and John the Baptist, in Elizabeth's womb, leaps for joy. Mary didn't have to say anything – the presence of Christ inside of her was enough for Elizabeth to be filled with the Holy Spirit and marvel at the goodness of God. In being present to her cousin Elizabeth and tending to her needs, Mary brings Christ into her life.

That is the power of the Holy Spirit when we allow Christ to enter into us, and we then go out and serve others, bringing Christ with us. God and our neighbor. When we make room for Christ in our lives and respond to the promptings he puts on our heart to serve others, amazing things happen.

As I just mentioned, our neighbors are coming. The biggest day of the year for the parish is approaching, and we will have the opportunity to serve others, to help bring Christ into their lives. We will have with us many visitors, many who perhaps used to come to church but for myriad reasons no longer do. This is our chance to welcome them back, which is a team effort. If ninety-nine people welcome you with a smile, and one person tells you to move because you're in their pew, guess who you'll remember and talk about to your friends. Don't be that

one person. Be the ones who help bring Christ into another person's life by showing kindness and compassion to the unfamiliar faces you see this week. Who knows? The interaction they have with you may be the one that tips the scale and prompts them to come back and hear more of the gospel that we preach. When we make room for Christ in our lives and respond to the promptings he puts on our heart to serve others, amazing things happen.

And all of these interactions we have will come up on the day for which we are preparing. Jesus Christ came to reveal to us the will of the Father. God's will is that we all worship, love and adore Him. On the day our Lord returns, we will have to give an account for how we cooperated with or frustrated His will. Let us prepare for that future day by what we do today. Let us do our best to love God with all of our heart, and love our neighbor as ourselves.