

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon December 3, 2017 – Advent 1

Every year around this time I am asked the same heartfelt question:

Why can't we decorate the church for Christmas yet?

And it is a totally understandable question!

The church looks beautiful decorated for Christmas!

And it smells great!

And, after all, it's clearly the Christmas season all around us.

Tree sales, Amazon shipping woes (don't even ask me why I've only received 4 of the 20 Advent calendars I ordered 3 weeks ago), giant inflatable lawn ornaments have started to pop up, and many of us already have at least one or two Christmas parties under our belts even though it's only December 3rd! The list goes on and on.

So, I am asked - *couldn't we just squeeze a few extra days out of the greens and the poinsettias and decorate early?*

And, I always explain that as gorgeous as the church looks, and as much as I myself would love a longer Christmas celebration, the answer is an unequivocal: Absolutely not.

And the reason is simple: for the church, it's not Christmas yet.

Christmas comes on December 25th, when we celebrate Christ's birth, which inaugurates the true Christmas season.

Right now, beginning today in fact, we are in Advent, the season of getting our hearts prepared, the season of patient waiting.

This morning's readings do a fabulous job of confirming this point.

This is the time to take a thorough, brutally honest reckoning of how each of us need to prepare for the arrival of the Christ.

Now, Secular Christmas and Spiritual Christmas are two very different events.

First of all, **Secular Christmas** is already on the calendar.

We know exactly when it is. It's the same day every year.

(You have 22 days to get ready, people!)

Spiritual Christmas, the coming of God into our hearts, is not on the calendar. Jesus' arrival into our lives is never announced.

As a church, we celebrate Jesus' birth on the 25th, but in reality, the moments when Jesus chooses to be born in our hearts are less predictable. And as these readings remind us, we need not sit passively by as if we have no agency in this moment, as if it just descends on some people and not others. No, there are ways to prepare, to till the soil, so that we can recognize Jesus for who he is and not slam the door on him, the way the innkeeper does on Christmas Eve.

Second of all, both events require vastly different kinds of preparation. Secular Christmas is a ruthless and demanding holiday, requiring our time, our money, our sharpest culinary skills; it requires our children to smile and not put their fingers in their noses for the Christmas card photo, which of course, has to be a) adorable, b) original, and c) much more creative than anybody else's Christmas card. Our Christmas tree can't be crooked. Our Christmas tree decorations have to be tasteful and not within arm's reach of toddlers, cats, or dogs. Our presents have to be perfect and we canNOT forget anybody,... even our sister's new mother-in-law? (Seriously? Am I supposed to buy her something? I have met the woman one time... Is a potholder a nice gift?) [Anyway...]

The best part is that secular Christmas tells us that even though we have never been more stressed out or bankrupted by a holiday, we have to be *joyful* and smile all the way through it. No stress allowed! If secular Christmas were a romantic partner, we'd call them "hard to please, demanding, and expensive." Our friends would tell us to break up with them.

And this is where I must say that if you are one of those people who seem to move effortlessly through the season without a care in the world, and everything still looks perfect, you owe it to the rest of us to keep that information to yourself.

Now... **Spiritual Christmas** is also demanding, but in an entirely different way. Preparing for the arrival of God is a quiet process, an interior one, the kind we do while driving alone in the car, or early in the morning before anyone is awake.

It's what we do as we sit here in church.

It's a deep and honest look at the things we've done we wish we'd done better, and in that moment of awareness, it's us asking God for help to do it better the next time.

It's an acknowledgment that we can never ever be fully ready for Jesus, but we can make sure we have done our best.

We can be more like the shepherds in the field, alone in the dark and the quiet with nothing but our own thoughts, and less like the innkeeper, who is focused on his profit margins, and who sees customers and patrons, not people.

Spiritual Christmas asks that we make room for Jesus by first acknowledging that, currently, there might not be enough room. That this exercise is necessary for even the most profoundly spiritual of all of us.

Because most human beings do in fact harbor an awareness of encounters and exchanges that didn't feel right, where we know we fell a bit short.

And maybe for really good reason!

But still, we wish it had been different.

Unloading these regrets or guilts or awarenesses onto God's lap is a form of housekeeping — it clears space for Jesus to arrive.

It is a de-cluttering we all need.

It reminds us that we have limits and are finite beings; and this is the beginning of realizing that we are utterly dependent on a God who loves us.

Some of us are better at this than others.

Some of us de-clutter our hearts and minds on a regular basis through prayer, self-reflection, meditation, mindfulness practices, and by taking advantage of the rhythms of the liturgical calendar and seasons like Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost.

But for others of us, this process can be incredibly elusive, often until our final days on this Earth. I suspect many of you, like me, have known a loved one, a good friend or family member, who in his or her final months or days, began that process of de-cluttering. All of their same old stories were there of course, but interspersed with them were some things they needed to recognize, to say out-loud, some new stories, joys, and regrets. Some of us go-go-go so much during our earthly lives that in our final days we have a lot of de-cluttering to do. But once we've done it, we're ready to meet Jesus.

So as you make your parallel journeys this season — preparing for both secular and spiritual Christmas — remember that it is far too easy to overlook the latter, and that it is frequently crowded out by the former. But here's a tip: every time you think you are not ready for Secular Christmas, use that moment to remind yourself that you are probably not ready for Spiritual Christmas either. And just take a moment to ask God for help in preparing your heart for the best gift any human being has ever received: the gift of Jesus' entry into your life.

AMEN.