

## “Ready or Not!”

Put both feet on the floor, if you can...hold your hands, palms “up” on your lap. Close your eyes if you are comfortable. concentrate on your breathing...say to yourself: “I **hope**...” and let the thoughts and dreams float through your mind. Now open your eyes and focus on the candle of hope.

Let us pray: **Hope** of the world, we come to you today with humble hearts offering you our thanks, asking you for forgiveness and handing over to you our list of requests. You alone hold our comings and goings and you guide us uphill and down. You alone know our unspoken **hopes** and dreams. May we be blessed with...enough hope to share your love during this holy season, O God. We pray in the name of the One who was born to share our common lot; who rose from the dead; and who will come again...for the third time! Amen.

The title of my message today is, “*Ready or Not!*”

On Friday I stopped into the Walgreens store in Merrill. I was having a conversation with the “check out” person about how quiet it was in the store... considering that it was *Black Friday*. It was a “Night Before Christmas” kind of feeling...”not a creature was stirring.” Then, out of the corner of my eye, there was a quick movement and a light touch on my foot. A tiny mouse took off along the edge of the counter and ducked in behind a display of wrapping paper. Some of you know we had one such visitor in the church office a little over a week ago. Wow! I wasn’t ready for that...again! As I picked up my bag, I said, “Well, I guess...things are starting to pick up in here now.”

What unexpected circumstances have you run into this week? Has something totally changed your holiday plans? What are you hoping for?

When the world he had known was crumbling around him and his city had burned down, the prophet, Jeremiah, recalls not the destruction but instead, utters these words: Jeremiah 33:14-15  
<sup>14</sup> The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. <sup>15</sup> In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land.      Jeremiah had not lost hope.

When the Kingdom of Judah was faced with invasion by its northern neighbors, the Kingdom of Israel (also called Ephraim) and Aram-Damascus (now known as Syria), God instructs the prophet Isaiah to tell king Ahaz that God will destroy Judah’s enemies. (Isaiah 7:1–10) Isaiah delivers God’s message and tells Ahaz to ask for a sign to confirm that this is a true prophecy (verse 7:11). Ahaz refuses, saying he will not test God (7:12). Isaiah replies that there will be a sign whether he *asks* for it or not, and the sign will be the birth of a child, and the child’s mother will call the baby, “Immanuel,” meaning “God-with-us” (Isaiah 7:13–14)

The candle of hope that has been lit today is our reminder that God is with us, whether we are ready for what’s next or not.

So then, just how important is being *prepared*? Ask any athlete. Ask a Boy Scout. Ask our musicians...ask the family hunters... they will tell you that “being prepared **is everything!**”

The church has traditionally set aside this first Sunday of Advent to begin getting ready for the celebration of Christmas. Thank you to those who have gotten a head start getting ready here. Be sure not to miss the continuation of the “hanging of the greens” on Wednesday night. (There will be supper at 6 and worship at 7.) Everyone is welcome.

It is beautiful already, don't you think? ...imagine it on Christmas Eve.

Outside of the walls of this building, *the countdown began some time ago!* I have noticed people on ladders stringing lights along the edge of their roofs and people driving down the highway with Christmas trees tied on top of their cars; local businesses are decorated and the Christmas parade has passed by.

It seems that we get ready for Christmas a little earlier every year. And, even before the dishes were cleared off the thanksgiving table, did *you* talk about getting the family and friends together again at Christmas? We did. Somehow, even though we never quite know how all the details will fit into place, we **hope** that all will be completed in time and that all will be well.

In ancient days, peoples' entire lives were spent expecting the coming of the Messiah. The prophets had foretold that coming. It was on everyone's minds. The prophet, Micah 5:2 CEV, spoke these words: <sup>2</sup> *As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.*

For as long as we can remember, the waiting time before Christmas has been important to us. We wait for only four weeks to celebrate the “coming” of Jesus. As children, we waited. As adults, we have helped the children *deal with* the waiting. There is a certain mystery, an anxious anticipation, an awakening that rouses our senses and shakes the cobwebs off our memories. We find ourselves thinking of sugar plum faeries, angel choirs and the young ones acting out the Christmas story. We start digging through the recipe box for the family jello recipe; we yearn for flickering candles and to hear the words of scripture that are so treasured in December.

As we make our paper chains and tear one off for each day of Advent, or as we savor the tiny pieces of chocolate on the Advent calendar, we rarely even *breathe the words* that Jesus will come again. The name, Advent, comes from the Latin word: *adventus*...meaning “coming.” The Latin, *adventus*, is the translation of the Greek word, *parousia*, used to refer to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Some refer to that coming as the third coming: 1. his birth, 2. his rising from the dead 3. the next coming.

The Gospel this morning seems to be an unlikely scripture for this ***time of preparation***, this hopeful time. Instead, John the Baptist makes us a little more than uncomfortable. In Matthew, chapter 3, as interpreted in the Message, it's called, “Thunder in the Desert!”

<sup>1-2</sup> *While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God's kingdom is here.”* <sup>3</sup> *John and his message were authorized by Isaiah's prophecy: Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!*

It is almost laughable that <sup>4-6</sup> *John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap and who lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey* was the one who attracted a crowd out in the desert.

*People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There, at the Jordan River, those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.*

Maybe *they* were saying, “We are so happy to hear some good news! Something positive is finally happening around here!” John was giving them something to hope for, and it was going to start right there, as he baptized them in the river. He wasn’t going to give them an informational pamphlet and let them go home and talk it over...

I’m thinking that those who heard John say, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” had no idea how imminent that announcement was. By this time, the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies had already taken place. Jesus was no longer the little baby lying in the manger...he was a grown man, who one day soon, would also be baptized by John. John’s prophecy was very close to being fulfilled!

You know...we have watered down Christmas and have taught our children, that first we must decorate the tree...like this...not that...we have argued with our family as to how to arrange the strands of lights and who we will invite for dinner...we are so stressed out by Christmas Eve that we have lost the “good news” We totally ignore the fact that Christ will return. We would never think of telling the children *that*...during the month of December. We need to take the summons to *be ready* for that return much more seriously than we do. It need not spoil our Christmas celebration. The expectation is actually a *perfect* way to prepare. The excitement of the children is our reminder that something good is going to happen.

Instead of bemoaning that Christmas, this year, may be looking yet again a little different than it has in Christmases past, look to the endless possibilities of preparing for a Christmas that you will long remember.

I’d like to share with you one of my favorite stories...

It is a true story about a nine-year-old named Wallace Purling. Wallace was in the second grade that year but should have been in the fourth. He had difficulty keeping up with the other kids. He was a little slow and clumsy, but Wally did his best.

Wally so hoped to be a shepherd with a wooden flute in the Christmas play that year. His teacher, however, assigned him a minor speaking part, that of the innkeeper. Wally got caught up in the timeless story unfolding on the stage as he stood and watched, mesmerized.

When the time came, Joseph guided Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the cardboard Inn, and Wally, the innkeeper, was there waiting. Wally tried to sound mean when Joseph asked for lodging. As he repeated his memorized lines, “Seek it elsewhere. The inn is filled,” as he stared straight ahead.

Joseph tried again. “We have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very tired.”

Once again, a stern-looking Wally reiterated the fact: there was no room in the inn.

“Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired.”

Wally relaxed his stiff pose and, for the first time, really looked at Mary. He paused so long that the audience began to get nervous. The prompter whispered: “Be gone!” Wally repeated the whisper: “Be gone.”

Joseph sadly put his arm around Mary; she rested her head on his shoulder as the two slowly moved away. The innkeeper did not move. He stood transfixed in the doorway. His mouth opened, his brow furrowed, and his eyes filled with tears. And suddenly this Christmas pageant took an unexpected turn.

“Don’t go, Joseph,” Wally called after them. “Bring Mary back.” Now Wally Purling’s face shone. “You can have my room.”

The story first appeared via Dina Donohue, “Trouble at the Inn,” in *Guideposts Greetings* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 2004), 3-5; as referenced by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *A Primer in Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 91-92.

The audience was certainly NOT ready for what Wallace Purling did that day, but God picked him to be the one to say the right thing...to do the right thing and it was his *perfect timing* that changed the Christmas experience of everyone in that room that day. I hope it has changed yours, too!

God is holding the door open to us. Come to God with your hopes and dreams. And while you do, prepare a place for the uninvited guest. Be ready to open your heart to those who knock on your door or text you in the middle of the night. Be ready to welcome in the prodigal child, the floundering, the lost and the grieving ones. Be ready to set another plate at your table, to write one more Christmas card, to share another cup of coffee.

Use your best talents, your most generous giving, and your best living not just for the next 28 days of Advent but for the next 364 days of this church year. Be prepared for love to steal into your heart this Christmas and for God to surprise you in some unexpected way. And I don’t mean a mouse! Ready or not, Jesus will come again, and it’s never too early to start getting ready for that. Take a deep breath. Let it out.

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Sermon preached by Pastor Mary Jo Laabs at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin on Sunday, November 27, 2022 at 9:30 AM