

Proper Preparation

First Sunday of Advent, Year C

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 2, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

When I returned to Sevilla Elementary School the day after Labor Day, 1966, I was *ready* to get started. Having spent the summer with my four siblings, a neighborhood full of kids my age and a *nearly* new Schwinn with high-rise handlebars, a slick back tire and a *leopard*-spotted banana seat, yet with “nothing to do,” and having turned a *very* mature nine-years-old over the summer, I was *more* than ready to get down to the rigors of fourth grade. My classmates and I assembled in our assigned room and began renewing neglected friendships, forged from three long years of shared triumphs and struggles. As we reminisced about the good old days in Miss Collins’s third grade class, we filed into our home away from home for the next nine months and gaped around at the new and wonderful things that it held. There were the obligatory green chalk boards, washed clean and glowing deeply from the janitor’s summer ministrations. There were shelves lined with rows and rows of books, as yet unopened and unread, promising simultaneously hours of pleasure and hours of pain. And there were the brightly decorated bulletin boards, including the first one inside the door, the small one that, as always, held such vital information as the fire evacuation plan, the “duck-and-cover” drill plan, the birthdays of fellow class members, and most importantly, the cafeteria menu.

As we found our clearly labeled seats, there was not a one amongst us that failed to notice that instead of the usual title above the board, “NOTES,” *our* bulletin board was labeled with a completely foreign, “M-I-S-C-E-L-L-A-N-E-O-U-S.” I could tell that everyone else had noticed this unwarranted deviation from tradition because everyone’s lips were as busy as my own, trying to “sound out” the multi-syllabic word. We were all jolted back to the moment by a clear voice from the front of the room as Miss Buikema, our new teacher, rose to welcome us.

Now, I suppose she was of normal stature, but I remember Miss Buikema as being about seven feet tall. She had big, poofy brown hair, skin that was tanned dark by whatever she did when she was *not* being our teacher, and the widest, *whitest* smile I had ever seen. With what I considered to be the voice of some sort of heavenly being, Miss Buikema introduced herself and welcomed us back to school in general and to the fourth grade in particular. She concluded her short speech by asking if any of us had any questions. Mostly we just looked at each other – a combination of shyness and ignorance keeping our hands glued to our desktops. Finally, one brave soul, a friend of mine named Danny Miller, raised a tentative hand. “Yes, Daniel,” she said, and everyone giggled. (Danny hated to be called Daniel.) Danny stood up and, pointing to the bulletin board, asked “What’s ‘miscellaneous?’” Giggles erupted again as Danny sunk back into his seat, until Miss Buikema asked, “Can any of you answer Daniel’s question?” Into the utter silence that descended, she asked again, “You mean you don’t *know* what ‘miscellaneous’ means?” Correctly interpreting our stunned, confused looks as a negative response, she went about the business of telling us why the bulletin board was so labeled. This board was for the collection of various information that didn’t fit other categories but was vital to our being properly prepared for each school day and for up-coming events in our school lives. “Preparation,” she said, “is *everything*.”

As she continued to talk about the importance of being prepared for so great an undertaking as the fourth grade, even my nine-year-old mind was aware that we had been *had*. We had learned something barely five minutes into the morning, and we had been maneuvered into actually *asking* for it. “Now class,” Miss Buikema said as she returned to her desk, “if you will each retrieve your paraphernalia, we will get started.” She had us *again*! I knew that it was going to be a *very* long year. I *loved* Miss Buikema, and I learned a lot from her that year, but nothing more significant than the importance of being properly prepared.

As we begin the season of Advent, our own preparations have already shifted into high gear. Yesterday, I had a ball being part of Henderson's Christmas parade, pulling St. Paul's own "Little Church" down Main Street, so I'm firmly in the Christmas mood. But I think I spied the first twinkling colored lights on a house on *South* Main about the fifteenth of October, and the sparkly snowflakes appeared on the lightposts all *over* downtown the Monday before All Hallows' Eve. That's easy enough to understand since for weeks, whole sections have been devoted to red ribbons, strings of lights, and illuminated lawn ornaments at Wal-Mart and Lowe's. There's no doubt that the halls are appropriately decked in preparation for the coming of Christmas.

The big news story last weekend was the phenomenal sales figures on "Black Friday" and "Cyber Monday," the "official" kickoff of the Christmas shopping season. I suppose I *am* glad that the carnage in Gaza wasn't more devastating, that there wasn't an accident more catastrophic or a natural disaster more tragic that would have bumped the frenzied shopping from the top spot on the networks and the local news. But it's almost comical that the top news story should *ever* be the availability of the latest smart phone or tablet or video game. There's no doubt that our spirit of conspicuous consumption is *more* than prepared for the Christmas season.

Just last evening, I was picking up something at the Walmart, when I saw a young family coming down the aisle with a cart. The youngest, an adorable little boy, maybe four years old, was skipping behind his mother and singing, "He's makin' a list, and checkin' it twice, gonna' find out who's naughty and nice – Santa Clause is coming to town!" It has been a few years since I kept track of such things, but I'll bet the lines to see the red-suited, white-bearded master of the North Pole are tremendous, and everywhere children are making *their* lists and checking them twice. There's no doubt that everyone's prepared for the arrival of good ol' St. Nick.

But for the Church, Christmas is not about tinsel and presents and a jolly "Ho, ho, ho!" We don't don this purple as an extravagant holiday display. We don't light the candles on our wreath in preparation for a full pile of gifts under the Christmas tree. We don't sing our anthems for the coming of the jolly, jelly-bellied elf that has evolved from the sainted Bishop of Myra. As glorious and as festive and as *fun* as all this preparation is, as wonderful as it is to be caught up in the wave of excitement leading to our annual celebration, Advent is much deeper, much more profound than any of that.

Because for the Church, Christmas is *not* fourth grade. It cannot be prepared for with a few miscellaneous items and a handful of paraphernalia. Christmas is about no less than the coming of God Almighty directly into the affairs of humankind. It is about a Father who was not willing to stand at arm's length from our sin and our sorrow and our suffering. It is about the crossroad between heaven and earth, between eternity and time, between the Creator and the ones who were created to love and to *be* loved. It is about God *become* one of us. It is for *this* fundamental, phenomenal, absolutely radical understanding of Christmas that this season is meant to prepare us.

As we move toward our annual celebration of the absolute *miracle* of God's mercy and love for us, let us be mindful of the enormity of that event – and prepare ourselves accordingly. I hope you will enjoy the beautiful decorations. I hope you will remember that it *is* blessed to give. And I hope you will have as much joy as I do with the traditions that have grown up around this wonderful time of year. But in doing so, I hope you will remember that the one for whom we are preparing is no less than the Lord of all Creation. As you prepare your home, your yard and your gift list, I hope you will remember to prepare your *heart* as well. After all, "Preparation is everything." It could be a *very* long year.