

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
2<sup>nd</sup> December 2007  
1 Advent  
Propers  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
Matthew 24:37-44

Song of Zechariah

Romans 13:11-14

Some of you are old enough to remember back to the 50's and early 60's. The world was in the midst of the Cold War. Nuclear proliferation was flourishing, and Americans – and probably Russians, too – were terrified that we would be the next target of a nuclear bomb.

Life had to go on, of course, with patriotic determination, and as many moms and dads built bomb shelters in their back yards – I wonder what they're used for now? swimming pools? wine cellars? – we kids would go through bomb drills at school:

Get away from the windows  
Duck under your desk  
Cover your face and eyes

As if that would protect us from being turned into ashes should a bomb be dropped. We thought we were prepared.

When I lived in California, we had what we called our "earthquake kit." Band-Aids, Snickers bars, a radio with batteries, a blanket, a photo of my sister, and.. a bottle of Scotch. Oh, yeah, and a gallon of water. When the 1989 earthquake rolled through San Francisco, I couldn't find the kit...

But at least I *thought* I was prepared!

In case I'm ever stuck in a snowdrift, in the trunk of our reliable Chevy Trail Blazer we have bottled water (no more Scotch!), extra gloves, matches (I have no idea what I will do with them, but it seems prudent), a small blanket, one of those magic things that warms your hands when you rub it – and, of course, some Snickers bars.

I *think* I'm prepared.

But how do we prepare for the arrival of God? How do we prepare for the glorious impossibility that God will be born – and come again? How do we prepare for Christmas?

We...

Find it, sign it, stuff it, lick it, stamp it, address and mail it.

We chop it or buy it, stand it, tilt it, tinsel it, light it, flock it, admire it.

We buy it, cart it, wrap it, tape it, ribbon it, ship it.  
 We drink it, eat it, Alka-Seltzer it.  
 We stuff it, tie it, baste it, roast it, carve it, eat it, bone it, freeze it.

*WE NEED TO STOP IT!*

It's all so frantic, so desperate!

We've forgotten how to *breathe*. To *listen*. To *watch*. And to *pray*.

We think we're prepared.. But for whose arrival?

We're ready for grandma, auntie, the kids, the co-workers, the friends, the relatives — but are we ready for Emmanuel? God-with-us?

And believe me, I'm not pointing fingers.. About this week I will read it, sing it, think about it, type it, copy, fold, and staple it.. and I, too, forget who we're waiting for.

I suggest you consider — even just consider — taking a Sabbath.

Sabbath, or Shabbat, is a centuries old custom, And it's actually *more* than a custom, it's a commandment from God! I find it quite amazing, and sometimes disturbing, that many of those people who insist that the Ten Commandments be publicly displayed in courthouses and on city hall lawns.. probably hit WalMart, the mall, and Home Depot on Sundays. *I do!* What about keeping Commandment Number Four?

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

None other than the Lord God gave us a model for Sabbath: work, work, work, create, create, create.. and then.. "God *blessed* the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done." (Gen. 2:3)

I'm not suggesting we follow this particular rule to the nth degree, but perhaps — by seeing how important Sabbath is to God, we can begin to appreciate how Sabbath might become important in our own lives.

It's a way of preparing. A way to stop — in anticipation. It's a way to breathe. To breathe in the goodness of God, to breathe out all that distracts us from the very presence of God in our midst. A way to be still before the One who is coming.

It's important to note that Sabbath isn't meant to be lifeless, or drudgery – Torah says, "You shall be held accountable for all permissible pleasures needlessly denied." Good food, the fellowship of family and friends, bodily pleasures enjoyed in trust and faithfulness – music, poetry, song, prayer, and worship – all these may be part of your Sabbath.

Sabbath isn't a time to do your laundry. Unless that gives you some sort of perverse pleasure. Or run errands.

It may be a time you set aside simply to finish reading a novel you haven't had time for.

It may be an afternoon for a luxurious bubble bath – or a nap.

Our lives have many demands, and probably for most of us an entire day of Sabbath may not be possible. But a space of time intentionally set aside for Sabbath keeping – surely that is possible for all of us.

And it's a form of preparation.

For in Sabbath-keeping we renew our hearts and minds. We can reflect on the busy-ness of our lives – and set aside that busy-ness for a refreshing few moments with God. (Did you know that the Chinese character for "busy" is a combination of characters for "heart" and "killing"?)

Sabbath is about freedom. All of a sudden there are no restrictions, no demands. Freedom as a gift from God. Even to *think* about all that must be done kills a Sabbath.

It separates the merely urgent from the truly important.

Sabbath is a time of rediscovering human be-ing.

A time to recover our relationship with God, a time, perhaps, to see the world just a little more as God sees it – because of all of a sudden, intentionally, we've taken ourselves out of it.

It helps us remember that my value in the divine economy is *given*, not earned, that God's desire is my *presence*, as well as the little red wagon I pull up to the Altar.

Instead of our daily quest for *more*, Sabbath can be a time when we can rest in what *is*, as if that were enough.

Sabbath is a mark of completion. God *completed* creation by resting – and because it is refreshing, it can help us prepare. The mind is cleared, the heart is opened.

Open and rested and sitting quietly in anticipation. We do not know when the hour is coming. The Son of all humankind, the Son of God, will come in his own good time.

And so we take Advent as a marker, a symbolic span of time in which we prepare.

It really doesn't have much to do at all with society's conception of Christmas. It has nothing to do with Christmas cards, presents, parties, trees, or turkeys – even though these are good, enjoyable, pleasures.

But what it does have to do with is a housecleaning of the soul. A moment in time when we look inward, through the window of the heart. Sabbath time gives us that opportunity like no other.

When we are quiet, we are more prepared. For the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the eternal life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit.

That, my friends, is being prepared.

Amen.