

Fourth Sunday in Advent
Matt Phillips
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 24, 2017

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;*
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*

Good morning! If we haven't yet met, my name is Matt Phillips and I'm the lucky guy who gets to run around with all the college students and young people who walk through our doors here at St. Mark's.

I love this time of year. It's one of my favorite times and today is a pretty big day! Now I'm sure we all know what today is, right? Yesterday, I heard a radio personality talking about how today is one of her favorite days of the year, and I thought, "Oh, me too!" But, imagine my dismay when her counterpart followed-up with, "Yeah, isn't Christmas Eve just the best?" And all that time, I thought they were talking about the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

And it IS the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Never you mind what comes later tonight; that's hours away! Christmas Eve is still hours away, and Advent is not over. Stop. Wait. Prepare.

I'm sure some of you have got the holiday fever by now. The trees are up. The tinsel and the holly have been hung. The presents have all been wrapped... hopefully. The stockings are ready to be stuffed, and the homemade cookies are just waiting to be set out for a certain round and jolly elf to enjoy. But that's all for tonight. We're not there yet. Stop. Wait. Prepare.

Now, I can understand the excitement and the difficulty you might have with containing it until we reach this evening. For over a month we've been bombarded from every side with Christmas this, holiday that, presents here, donations there. You might even feel it has been Christmas all along...

Or maybe you just can't wait for this all to be over with already. For many people across the globe, this time is anything but cheery and I am mindful—and I ask you to be mindful as well—of the struggles that the holidays can bring to some of our brothers and sisters who simply cannot wait for Tuesday morning to finally arrive.

But whether you find this time to be a time of struggle or a time of joy, it can be so easy to get so caught up in the hustle and bustle that the excitement and impatience grow and grow. But for now—even for just the next few hours—I invite you to live into these last few moments of Advent: Stop. Wait. Prepare.

As we've heard over these last few weeks, that's what Advent is all about. We stop; we set aside this time and mark it as something different. We wait; as we await the Christmas Season, we remember the long wait of our spiritual ancestors before the Nativity of Christ and are mindful of the long waiting-period for Christ's second coming in which we now find ourselves. And, we prepare. We prepare not only our homes, families, and selves to celebrate Christmas, but we seek

to prepare for Christ's return as well. We prepare ourselves. We prepare others. We prepare the world. Stop. Wait. Prepare.

Some of you know that I serve two congregations here in the Milwaukee area. I'm the Campus and Youth Minister here at St. Mark's, and I'm the youth group leader for a Presbyterian Church in Shorewood as well. Three weeks ago, I got to survey the youth group's thoughts on how we could prepare for the Second Coming.

They had ideas on how to prepare themselves; a few of my favorites were: read more of the Bible, pay more attention during youth group and not just when we're playing games, and actually go to Church!

They had great ideas on how to prepare others: tell people about Jesus, invite friends to Church, share their own experiences of God with those who ask.

But, you would not believe me if I told you they had the hardest time trying to figure out simply how they could personally prepare the world for Jesus' arrival. Or maybe you would absolutely believe me. Maybe you are asking yourself the exact same question at this exact moment: How can I personally prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ?

I got some great knee-jerk answers from the bunch of middle-schoolers and high-schoolers: answers like "Uh..." or "I don't know." After about the third "Uh..." and the fourth "I don't know," one young lady said, "I can't prepare the world, I'm just one person; I'm just a kid!

How often can we identify with this 7th grader? "I can't." "I don't have the time." "I'm just one person." "I don't have the resources." "I'm just a kid!" How often, when presented with the prospect of preparing the world, do we think, "Who, me?!" From time to time I personally find myself shooting off any one or any combination of these responses. And, if you find yourself instinctively falling back on this mentality, be assured that you are most definitely not alone.

Our Scriptures are teeming with people whom God tasks with preparing the world in one way or another, regardless of how unqualified for the job they seemed or believed themselves to be.

The prophet Jeremiah protested that he was too young when called by God. After his conversion, the Apostles protested Paul's inclusion as one of their own. Even Moses—during his encounter with God in the burning bush—proclaimed his own inadequacy FOUR times to God before finally accepting his call; even still, Moses, Paul, and Jeremiah did their own parts to prepare the world for God.

Even this morning, we catch a glimpse of two unlikely people whom God charged with preparing the world: King David and Mary, mother of our Lord.

You might remember that before David was ever a king, he was a child shepherd whose father and brothers didn't think he was even significant enough to be *considered* to reign as king. In today's passage, David is caught up in his own, self-perceived inadequacies due to the fact that he hadn't erected a Temple for God's dwelling. God then reassured him that not erecting a Temple wasn't that important and even further promised to keep the reign of David's lineage eternal; a promise we know God made good on, because of our second reading.

And in that second reading, we find Mary. I cannot even begin to comprehend what would have been going on in Mary's mind at the moment of the Annunciation. Not only was she visited by

an Angel, but we read in Luke that she immediately points out the obvious impossibility to Gabriel when she's told she will conceive and bear a son: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" She's essentially saying, "Look Gabriel, nice try but I wasn't born yesterday. I know a thing or two about this world; I know how stuff works, and I know good and well that virgins don't just go around having babies. That just isn't possible." Gabriel wasn't fazed. "Nothing will be impossible with God" he assured her. And then, despite the impossibility, despite her self-perceived inadequacy, Mary said "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" and she too did her oh-so-important part to prepare the world for God.

Now, I must confess to you brothers and sisters that I am neither a soothsayer nor fortuneteller, so I can't promise you that God won't call you to reform the sinfulness of a nation, evangelize an empire, deliver a nation out of bondage, or choose you to govern over a nation; I can't even promise you that God won't choose you to conceive and bear Christ our Lord, however impossible we believe it be. However, I can, and I do make the same promise to you that I made three weeks ago to that group of teenagers: God absolutely has a part for you to play in preparing this world.

You are chosen, called, and tasked with preparing this world for Christ. Right now, at this very moment, in these waning hours of Advent and even into Christmas and beyond, you have your own part play in making this world a better place—in preparing it for Jesus. Maybe God is calling you to feed someone who is hungry. Some of us here would love to connect you with ministries like The Gathering. Even buying a meal for someone who needs it is a great place to start. Maybe Christ has led you to notice a member of our community hasn't been in the pews for a while and is probably greatly missing Holy Communion. Have you ever thought about bringing some of the sacrament and your own self to visit them? Even a simple phone call can make a world of difference. Have you noticed someone is unintentionally planning to spend the holidays alone at home? I invite you to invite them to celebrate these joyous days with you and yours. You would be so surprised how meaningful it can be to simply smile at someone on the street and wish them Happy Holidays.

It doesn't take one, huge act to prepare the world. It will more likely take millions of small ones. And, I promise you, we all have a part to play—however large or small—to prepare this world for God. If you'd like some help identifying yours, we've got people here—including me—who would love to speak with you. Even in the midst of all this holiday excitement: even though Christmas Eve is only a few hours away: savor and be mindful of these last moments of Advent and what you can do to stop, wait, and prepare. And may you—when you discern God's call to you, when you discover your part in preparing this world—may you respond in the fashion of the Virgin Mary: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.