

Most people feel overwhelmed this time of year. The sense that we are under an onslaught is inescapable. Cards arriving in the mail remind me that once again, I have to send out my own, even though I swore to myself that I would do better this time. Nor have I finished my Christmas shopping. All the heavy food and sweets that seem to surround us are welcome expressions of hospitality, even as they make me wonder just how much self-control I have to call upon. Even the weather has joined the conspiracy, with unseasonable cold coming our way. And if you have to prepare the house for company, God help you. But people bear all this and more in the knowledge that it will pay off with happy times with family and friends.

Christians, of course, also have even more to look forward this time of year. We enjoy a great deal of excitement in the days leading up to Christmas. The great O antiphons practically shout for joy with their evocative titles for Jesus. We work extra hard to make sure our worship will be as rich and beautiful as possible, and speaking of which, thank you to the altar and flower guilds, all our readers, ushers, greeters, acolytes, sound and video operators, Nancy who schedules most of these ministries and creates our bulletins and announcements, and everyone else who helps out informally. Special thanks to Susan who is organizing our Christmas pageant after the great success yesterday of Breakfast with Saint Nicholas, which she also organized, and thanks to everyone else who contributed to that success. I love all of these offerings of time and talent individually, but I especially love seeing us pull together as a parish with high spirits in order to be well-prepared for Christ's long-anticipated arrival among us.

We might as well, because he is coming whether we are ready or not. God has never cared much for accommodating our schedules, our ideas of what should happen and when it should come to pass. God sometimes gives us surprises out of the blue, but sometimes God tells us exactly what will happen and what we are meant to do in response. Christians often cite reading from Isaiah we just heard as being primarily a prophecy of the birth of Jesus, and there's nothing wrong with interpreting it that way, but that reading was first and foremost part of an immediate communication from God, through the prophet Isaiah, to Ahaz, the king who ruled Judah at the time.

Centuries before Jesus, Ahaz found himself in a sticky geopolitical situation which I won't get into here. The point is that God was offering Ahaz a way out, a solution on a silver platter. God would bring peace and prosperity, integrity and independence, and even made the astonishing offer of giving the king any sign he could ask for to prove that God would deliver. All Ahaz needed to do was trust God. But he did not, for he had been busy worshiping false gods, looting the Temple and setting up an idolatrous altar there, and even sacrificing one of his sons in a pagan ritual. But despite all this, God's future came into being, and Isaiah even told Ahaz how it would happen. God's plan to have a faithful king on the throne was already under way in the queen's womb. Ahaz died at the age of 36 and his son Hezekiah became a good and faithful

king. Hezekiah was not just the sign of God's enduring love for his people, but also a means by which that love was manifested to them. Hezekiah reversed the idolatry of his father and restored the worship of God, and God blessed the kingdom with renewed integrity, both politically and spiritually.

Contrast this drama with the story of Mary and Joseph. The most familiar version of the Christmas story is St. Luke's, since that's the one we hear every year on Christmas itself. Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view, which is wonderful. But Joseph's point of view is important, too. There's something of a disconnect between the two, which might seem strange until you remember first, that hearing a story from one point of view doesn't mean that another point of view is wrong, or that the story itself is not true. If anything, multiple witnesses telling the same story from their own points of view is a good reason to accept that the story is true. And second, that there are communication issues in every group and relationship, even in the holiest family of all time.

Remember that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit after agreeing to God's plan of salvation as communicated by the angel Gabriel. Apparently, no one thought to tell Joseph until after that happened. Because his angelic vision only comes after he learns that Mary is pregnant, and decides to break off the engagement because he knows he is not the father. In sharp contrast with Ahaz, Joseph does exactly what God tells him to do. Scripture does not record anything Joseph said. Perhaps that is because when he learned the glorious truth about Mary's pregnancy, he said, "Something that could have been brought to my attention *yesterday!*"

But interestingly, from there the story plays out in a parallel way to that of Ahaz and Hezekiah. Remember that Joseph, despite his humble occupation as a carpenter or other tradesman, was descended from the same royal line as Ahaz and Hezekiah, going back to David. Legally, Jesus became a descendant of David by Joseph effectively adopting him, and history repeated itself with the son being sent by God to reconcile God and humanity.

So Jesus is descended from a royal family, yes, as well as the incarnation of the one true King of all creation, but Jesus is also the culmination of a pattern of God making good on promises of reconciliation, redemption, and restoration. God intervenes and does new things in human history, upsetting the status quo and those who benefit from it. Lest you think that this is only a lesson for the most powerful people, remember that everyone but the people at the very bottom of society benefit in some way from the status quo. That is probably a reason why God has special love for the poor. But ordinary people are susceptible to feeling frustrated, inconvenienced, and slighted when God changes things we care about or calls us to do things we don't want to do. God's ways are disruptive, we may see them as inconvenient, but if we trust God and open ourselves to God's ongoing revelation and work, we may understand that we are better off living God's way, and trust God more.

So how do we prepare to meet this God of disruptive power and might? How can we be ready for what we can't predict, or even understand? God has already told us. God has taught us how to refuse the evil and choose the good. God has shown us how to love the poor and serve those who have nothing to give us in return, nothing but a glimpse of the face of Christ. God is ready to receive our repentance and rededication. When we turn back to God, God will meet us, not with anger or any harshness, but with pure grace and sublime peace. If you know how to embrace a crying child and reassure them that everything is all right, how much more will God comfort us? And even more than that, God does not just stand ready to receive us, but also sends the Holy Spirit constantly to encourage us, strengthen us, build us up, and lead us home.

Every human heart is like a temple, a place set apart where God can come to dwell, in order to be close to humankind. Even though our hearts belong to God by right, for God designed and built them, God entrusts them to us, to manage, to determine what will be allowed in and what will be kept out. Just like the wicked king Ahaz, and those who carried out his orders, we are capable of erecting false altars in the temples of our hearts, we can let them be the sites of unholy sacrifices to money, power, and all manner of indulgence. So examine your heart closely and if you find an altar there that does not belong, *tear it down*, just like Hezekiah did when he came to power on the throne of Judah. The sooner the better.

The world offers so many distractions that we might feel like we could never be ready for anything, let alone God. But this is only overwhelming if we give competing worldly concerns equal or greater consideration to serving God, like Ahaz did. There is no better way to prepare for what God might do in the future than to do God's will in the present. If we follow the example of Hezekiah, Joseph, Mary, and of course Jesus himself, and decide to put God ahead of everything else, our lives will come into peaceful, meaningful focus, and we will be overwhelmed with grace.