

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Halloween gave way to Thanksgiving. And now, Christmas is pushing Thanksgiving aside and charging right into our lives. At home, we still have fall decorations displayed, and leftover turkey in the refrigerator. Retailers have been pushing Christmas items for months. There is a sense of urgency to have the house in order before the holidays. Shop early! Hurry up! It would be tragic if Christmas Eve came, and I wasn't ready. So, I must get going. What am I waiting for? Meanwhile, the cookies must be baked and all of the holiday décor placed. Better hurry to buy a tree before all of the good ones are gone, and Charlie Brown trees are the only ones left. Gotta get my house in order! Gotta be prepared!

This is stressful! I feel like it's push, push, push. Hurry, don't miss the sales, you don't want to be left out. Make sure your home is decorated in a way that would impress Martha Stewart. Don't be late! Hurry. Tiring!

Isn't Advent supposed to be a time of quiet reflection and anticipation of the coming of our Lord? I thought I'd check out what Holy Scripture has to say. I was sure it would be something peaceful, and reflective. And - - - what did I hear?

“The days are coming says the Lord.” “When you see these things take place, you know the kingdom of God is near” “Be on guard”

“Don’t let that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.” “Be alert at all times praying that you may have the strength to escape.”

Really? Be alert! Be on guard! The days are coming! What days are coming? “Don’t let that day catch you unexpectedly!” What am I supposed to be ready for? This on top of everything else? So, whatever this is, it can’t be good because I must pray to have the strength to escape. Now I’m stressed and worried!

I already feel that burning sense of urgency kindled by retailers, media, and social expectations (heart burn). The urgency of scripture is only piling on. But, the holidays are coming, and I don’t want to look unprepared. I don’t have time for scripture stuff. I must stay focused, on task, diligent, and manage my time wisely. If I do this right, I’ll be ready for Christmas!

Ok – I need to take a time-out. Take a deep breath. Bring my mind to a place of peace and reflection. Breathe!

Focus - - - - Are the readings today really attempting to instill a sense of urgency? Yes. Are they also attempting to liberate me? Yes! Then, from what am I being liberated? What does this urgent freedom look like?

This Advent/Christmas freedom is remembering that Jesus was born 2000 years ago, and also remembering that He will return in the future, to liberate us from all pain and suffering. It celebrates what was, and celebrates what is to come.

Freedom is knowing that when the world seems to be falling apart, and there is chaos all around, we can “stand up and raise our heads, because Christ’s redemption is near.” Freedom is the confidence that we can stand before God, face to face, redeemed and righteous, because of Christ’s intercession on our behalf. Our freedom is won by not being weighed down with the worries of this life, and held captive by things that will someday fade away.

If I do this right, freedom can be found by having my house in order. How do I get my house in order? Does my holiday house need to look like it came out of Better Homes and Gardens? Am I so focused on decorating my house with ornaments and greenery, that I neglect to decorate my heart with love and forgiveness? Do my baked goodies have to rival those on the British Baking Show? Do they distract me from sprinkling the sweetness of hospitality and understanding? Am I so concerned that the Christmas tree branches are straight and perfect, that the branches of my soul are dry and withered, unable to reach out to others? Does **my** joy in the season depend upon **my** ability to re-create a Norman Rockwell painting? Am I so consumed with reliving my nostalgic memories of the past, that I lose opportunities to create new memories with others?

I am not suggesting that decorating for Advent and Christmas, baking delicious sweets, and offering gifts to each other are bad. Not at all! I am simply suggesting that we must not be held captive by them.

I get it! I don't know if I can drop everything and get my spiritual house in order. Perhaps I can get to it right after Christmas. I'll have more time then. It's only four weeks away. What could happen?

There were six people in Waukesha that did not realize that they were going to meet God, face-to-face that day. I can't imagine that Ahmaud Arbery planned on dying on that morning when he went out for a run. How many of our loved ones succumbed to the effects of Covid? Did they ever expect to die in a pandemic? What about the countless victims of violence? Did they have time to get their houses in order?

Jesus tells us that everything will ultimately pass away. Christmas trees, decorations, dinners, and gifts will all fade into the past. So much of what we stress over will no longer matter. Jesus assures us that his words will never pass away. The Word made flesh will never pass away.

So, if what we stress over will no longer matter, does it really matter now? How many points of stress could be left behind without anyone noticing? Could the Christmas tree be good enough? Could the decorations be lovely enough? Could the meal be simple and tasty? Can gifts have their rightful priority without being a distraction to the whole focus intended by the holiday?

Perhaps we could fill our houses with things that will never fade away. Perhaps your gift of your presence to others can be the most valuable gift you can give. Perhaps making sure that you tell all of your loved ones how much you love them could be the best gift ever! Repairing a broken relationship could be a life-changing gift. Repairing a broken or strained relationship with God, through prayer, could not only be a gift to you, but can help put your house in order.

May you decorate your house with love, compassion, and forgiveness. May you cook up ideas to welcome those who feel unwelcome, heal the broken, give dignity to the undignified, and love those who feel unloved. May you savor every moment spent with those you love. May you put up your tree, remembering the preciousness of life, and the memories that hang upon every limb. May you generously give the gift of yourself, your stories, your wisdom. May you clear out the clutter in your house, such as hate, hurt, envy, and greed. May you prepare the way of the Lord.

Put your house in order now! Your time could be running out! But wait, there's more! You never know when the Lord will show up to bring **you** home. To His home! Prepared perfectly for you, magnificently adorned, surrounded by the Communion of Saints, with an empty seat waiting - for you - at the eternal banquet table. Be free – and celebrate! Amen.