

Giving God Our Best

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, December 6, 2009**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Lord, we always count it a privilege to come to this place to be with our family and our friends, together close to the symbols of our faith that remind us of your presence in our lives, not just here but throughout the week in our daily living. We pray that you would speak to us in this time of worship through all of the different pieces of our worship together: the hymns and the anthem, readings from scripture, the prayers, the sermons, the quiet times, and even in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Through it all you seek to speak to us to shape our lives. And our prayer is that your Word will fall on lives ready to receive that Word and ready to live that Word, and so shape us in this hour together, gracious God, that our faith would be increased and our community of faith would be strengthened as witnesses to your son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sermon:

Well, 'tis the time of year when we prepare our homes for celebrations. We prepare our places where we live to receive guests, guests from out of town, some from other countries. Or perhaps we are preparing our lives to go visit family in far away places to be reunited with those who we love, and who have nurtured us throughout our years and now we're travelling back because we have been away. We look forward to those times of renewal and refreshment as we welcome visitors into our home and as we are welcomed as visitors into others homes. I remember as a boy that this time of year was an exciting time of year because we usually prepared to receive guests into our home and we also prepared ourselves to go be guests in others homes.

I remember taking great care in preparing the home to receive guests. We would move furniture around and vacuum in places that don't normally get vacuumed during the year. We would clean off shelves and dust bookcases that normally do not receive that kind of attention during the year, but this was a special time of year and so we paid

extra special attention to our home to make sure that it was ready to receive guests. We would put up decorations like the decorations we'll be putting up this coming Saturday in our church sanctuary here. We would have a Christmas tree; we would have decorations going up the stairs. I remember my mother liked nutcrackers and so we would have little nutcrackers some years that would go up the stairs or one year she had little angel candles that went and sat on each of the stairs going to the upstairs bedrooms. We wanted those who came to our home to visit, those who were expected and the unexpected visitors, to feel special when they came to our home and so we did take great care to decorate our home.

Another thing that I remember from my childhood is that my mom, being of British descent, would always at this time of year be carefully preparing Christmas puddings or plum puddings and I remember as a little boy helping her with those and oftentimes they would become gifts for people who unexpectedly came by our home or they would become gifts that we would offer to those who were special in our lives.

It's a time of year when we do a lot of preparation to celebrate. And I think in particular we spend an awful lot of time preparing our homes, especially if we are going to receive guests whether it be family or friends who might visit over the holidays. We want those who come into our homes to feel as though we are honoring them. To feel as though they are people who are special to us. We want people who visit our homes who come and share a meal with us, spend a night in a special guest room; we want those that we've taken some time around the holidays to show them around the sites of the city and to see the lights and the special decorations of the city. Maybe even we've taken some time to take them to a concert or a special show in the city. We want those who come to visit with us, we want them to leave with a feeling that they are special to us; that they are people whose lives have made a difference in our lives. And so we want them to feel honored and to feel special. And all of that preparation is our effort to communicate that very carefully to those who visit in our homes, especially at this time of year. That they know we cherish the relationship we have with them.

The prophet Malachi lived in a time in Israel's history when the people had forgotten about honoring God's presence; about treating God in their midst, in their times of worship and in their other times together as a community; treating God as a very special guest, someone who was to be honored. If you take the time to read the entire book of

prophesy of Malachi, and it's a fairly short book, you will see a prophet who was angry and disappointed with his people. Because instead of offering to God the very best that the people had to offer, he realizes that the people had so dishonored God that there was little that they could do to repair the damage that had been done. Instead of bringing the first fruits to be sacrificed on the altar at the temple, the people were bringing the leftovers. They were bringing to God to be sacrificed on the altar to God - as a gift to God, as a sign of their faith, a symbol of their faith - blemished sheep, sheep that had broken legs, sheep that were blind. Instead of bringing the very best to God, they were bringing the worst to God. And while it seemed on the surface that the people were doing the right thing and the priests of that day encouraged the people to at least bring these gifts to God, the prophet Malachi saw that God had not been honored, that God had indeed been dishonored by these offerings.

I think Advent is a time in our lives when we are called to sort of step back from the way we are living and to ask ourselves questions, like "What is it in my life that is keeping me from having a good strong relationship with God? Is it something I'm doing that's keeping me from being in God's presence or is it something I'm failing to do to draw closer to God." And just as we prepare our homes to receive guests and that preparation communicates volumes about how we cherish and prize the relationships of those who come into our home for a visit, for dinner, for spending the night, or spending some time with us; so too the way we prepare our lives to receive the birth of the Messiah reflects volumes about our values and what's most important in our lives. I think Advent calls us to look at God as being that one that is most important in our lives. And that relationship is the key relationship to all relationships.

Advent challenges us to prepare ourselves each and every year to take time and step back and reflect upon the way we have lived our lives this past year. And to look at those things that either need to be swept out of our lives like dust from a home, or those things that need to be brought into our lives that draw us closer to God like bringing decorations into a home at holiday time. It all makes a statement, and Advent challenges us as a community to not only look at ourselves individually but to look at ourselves as a church. To step back and say, what are those things we do as a congregation that indeed strengthens our relationship with God? And what are those things that we do as a congregation or we fail to do that are keeping us from having that strong relationship

with God? It's a time to evaluate, a time to step back and try to look at our lives with a little bit of objectivity. So that in the end we might offer our best to God and that God might be one, who while visiting with us, while dwelling in our midst, would know that God is honored above all, that the relationship with God is prized above all relationships.

Perhaps a good way to look at Advent would be through the eyes of the author, Charles Dickens, with his classic work, *A Christmas Carol*, where Ebenezer Scrooge one evening, Christmas Eve, is given the gift of being able to step out of his life in order to see how he is living his life and the effect that has on countless others. We often think that the decisions that we make stay with us and affect only us, but the reality is that even the simplest decision that we make affects at least one or two others; possibly will affect many into the future. And Ebenezer Scrooge is given that gift as the main character of *A Christmas Carol*. He's taken out of his life in order that he might see how his life has been lived, how it is currently being lived, and what will happen and how that life will play out into the future.

I believe today John the Baptist calls us to prepare the way of the Lord by simply stepping back and taking a little time to look at our lives and the way we are living them. To not get caught up in the excitement of this holiday to the point that we forget who we are and we forget who God is. But rather to use this time as a time to refocus, a time to see ourselves through the eyes of others and hopefully, maybe even catch a glimpse of ourselves the way God sees us in order that our lives of faith might reflect the very best that we have to offer to our God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.