

THE REV. STEPHEN B. KLOTS

SERMON FOR ADVENT I (DECEMBER 1, 2019) AT ST. ANDREW'S
CHURCH, KENT

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Thanksgiving Day, I ran a race, the Manchester Road Race over in Manchester, CT. It's not a particularly long race—a bit under five miles—but it's one with quite a bit of history, more so than the average Turkey Trot, so every year on Thanksgiving somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand runners descend upon Manchester for the race. It's a race that I've done nearly every year since college, and, while I'm not anywhere near as fast as I used to be, it's one that I quite enjoy doing. There are massive crowds and live bands all along the course, and it's a great way to kick off Thanksgiving. For a number of years now, I've simply run it with a friend of mine. I wanted to be able to keep up this year—and, ideally, not be too sore the next day. I had visions of being so sore that, when I came here for church, I wouldn't be able to genuflect at the altar.

I began training in earnest for this race a few weeks ago. I had been in pretty good shape in September, but then the busyness of the fall got up to me, and I knew I had to do some preparation for the event—not too much, because then my knees

would rebel against me, but enough so I was ready. For the last several weeks, I must have run four or five times per week, sometimes for only two miles, or maybe three, but enough to get my legs ready. And my preparation worked. I felt great out there. I had a blast, savoring the shouts of the crowd and the numerous bands along the course, many of which seemed to be playing the theme from *Rocky*. Our finishing times were not particularly amazing, but that wasn't really the point. I ran, I kept up, and afterwards, I felt virtuous enough to have an extra slice of pie when it came time for dessert.

It really was all about the preparation. I knew the race was coming up, and I did what I needed to do before the day itself so that all would go well. I'm sure each of you can relate that—to some event in your life when everything went well because of the preparation you put in beforehand. Maybe for you it was also a race or some other athletic challenge, but perhaps it was something more important—the accomplishment of an academic goal, or a wedding, perhaps the birth of a child. You were prepared, and everything went well.

I know we'd like to think we're like this all of the time—that we're always so well organized—but of course we're not. After many years of teaching, for example, I've begun to think that it doesn't matter whether I give my students a week or one

day to write an essay. No matter how much time I allow, the papers often look the same because my students will put things off and put things off until the last minute. There are so many things they'd rather do, some of them frivolous, and they don't want to think about the due date, and in consequence they'll finish at some late hour the night before the assignment's due. They won't put in the necessary time or preparation. I'm not immune to this either. Last week I went in to see the dentist, Dr. George Hetson, and of course I spent a good ten or fifteen minutes brushing and flossing my teeth before going in for the appointment. I felt good about things, but then the hygienist was quick to point out spots where maybe I hadn't been so thorough over the previous few months. Like my students, in this case I guess I was mainly good at the last minute preparation.

In a more general sense, how many of us prepared for those events that we can be sure will happen at some point, but we just don't know when? Maybe it's the possibility of a fire at home, or a natural disaster, or the death of a loved one. Sure, we remember to change the batteries on our smoke alarms occasionally, but is there more we need to be doing? Isn't this true for all of life?

I speak of all of this because today is the First Sunday of Advent, and Advent for the church is a season of preparation—of preparation for the coming of God. It is a

time of liturgical preparation for our celebration of God coming among in the Christ child at Bethlehem. It's a time of prayerful preparation for that moment—which we affirm in the creeds—when Christ shall come again to judge the living and the dead. It's also a time of spiritual preparation, so we might see the many ways He comes into our lives each day—in the people we meet, in this holy place, and in our many and varied callings. Ultimately, it's time for all of us to prepare for that moment when our earthly work is done and we see God face to face. As part of this, Advent is a time when we ask ourselves if our preparations are adequate. If life is like a race, how is our training? Are we putting in the extra mile? If life is like a class, how are our study habits? Are we diligent in our preparations, or are we like my students, procrastinating on what needs to be done? Are we putting our preparations off because, like my students, we don't really want to think about the due date?

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man—the great Day of Judgment—as being like a great surprise. No one will know when the hour is near, and people will just going on with their lives, doing what they always do—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage—when God comes. Jesus invites his followers to prepare for this through a state of watchfulness: “Keep awake, therefore,” he says, “for you do not know what day your Lord is coming.”

We cannot know when that will happen. Closer to home, all of us know in some intellectual way that our days on earth are numbered, that some day, when we have passed, people will gather and pray for us, perhaps even weep for us, maybe in this very church—but we still go on with our lives, living, working, paying taxes, worrying about the government, sometimes running races, always celebrating the holidays, marrying and giving in marriage, and generally getting bogged down in the ordinary. Do we prepare for that event, that great encounter with God, as Christ would have us prepare? “Therefore, you must also be ready,” he says, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

This morning’s reading from the Letter to the Romans gives us some idea of what these preparations might look like. St. Paul writes, “Let us then cast aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” In this passage, Paul is pointing to what I’d like to call the three Ps of Advent—penitence, purpose, and prayer—that are all part of preparation.

First, our Advent preparations require penitence. This means careful consideration of what we've done wrong—or what we're doing that is wrong—and then resolving to change our ways—exchanging, as Paul puts it, the works of darkness for the armor of light. It would for us to boil that down to a list of vices or bad habits that must be cast away, but I believe there's more to it. We need also to ask how we have hurt others, and then we must try to make amends. In Advent, we recognize that our days on Earth are limited, and so we must ask if we want to go to the grave holding onto some grudge or some regret for how we have treated others, and then we must ask for the grace to change our ways.

Second, our Advent preparations require purpose. St. Paul enjoins us to “live honorably as in the day, not in debauchery or licentiousness, not in quarreling or jealousy.” To live honorably means recognizing that our days are numbered, and so working to make the most of each day as a gift from God, rather than just frittering those days away in useless or harmful ways. I am hoping that there are at least a few country music fans here, because I am reminded of a song from a number of years ago by Tim McGraw, “Live Like You We're Dying.” It's sung from the perspective of a man who learns, through the death of his own father, how to live life. Sang McGraw,
“I was finally the husband, that most the time I wasn't.

And I became a friend a friend would like to have.

And all the sudden goin' fishing wasn't such an imposition.

And I went three times that year I lost my dad.

Well, I finally read the good book, and I took a good long hard look at what I'd do if I could do it all again.”

For McGraw, that's what it meant to live like you're dying—to live with a new sense of purpose and love. As in the song, in Advent, we recognize anew that each day is a gift, and so try to make the most of each day for our own enjoyment and for the well-being of others.

Finally, our Advent preparations require prayer—prayer because penitence is hard. It's hard to look in the mirror and see—and admit—what's wrong in your life. It's hard to ask for forgiveness when you've hurt somebody else, even in some small way. Prayer is also necessary because living with purpose is hard. With so many distractions clamoring for our attention, it's hard to stay focused on what truly matters: being Christ-like. Loving God. Loving our neighbors. As St. Paul writes, we must “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and so we must pray for God's strength and wisdom and guidance and compassion.

Penitence, purpose, and prayer—but it really all comes back to preparation, and it is so good to be prepared. Even so, perhaps the greatest thing we can do is to trust in the loving mercy of God for us in Jesus Christ. I'm thinking of another song now—"People Get Ready", which was first sung by the Impressions in the 1960s and then covered by many others such as Rod Stewart. It's a song that is somewhere on the border between gospel and soul. Sang the Impressions,

People get ready

There's a train a-coming

You don't need no baggage

You just get on board

All you need is faith

To hear the diesels humming

Don't need no ticket

You just thank the Lord

Yes, we must prepare for the coming of the Lord in whatever form that will take in our lives. People, *get* ready. But when I think back now to the way I prepared for my race on Thanksgiving, I'm glad I put in those miles. Yes, they made the race easier—even the long second mile, which is almost entirely up hill. But more than that, that preparation and those miles were good for me. It was good to set aside some time physically and emotionally each day for myself, even if it was just long enough to run a few miles. I felt tired but good when I finished each run. In a way, I was already a winner when I went to the race. I hope the same holds true

for all of us this Advent. Yes, we must live lives of penitence, prayer, and purpose as we prepare for God's coming at Christmas and in our own lives—and I pray and trust that, in doing so, we will find that God has been with us all along. Amen.