

Advent a time of Spiritual House Cleaning (Fr. John Parker)

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I have never been a particularly patient person. In grocery stores, I do mental math trying to determine which checkout line is the fastest. I'd like to be done **now.**

When approaching a red light, I aim for the lane with fewer cars. I want to be at my destination **now.**



I've never done particularly well with anticipation either. I confess that as a child, I often sought and found Christmas presents which my parents had attempted to hide in dark guestroom closets. I wanted to know what I was getting *now*.

It wasn't until my wife's pregnancy with our firstborn son that I was able to long for anything. By God's grace, I waited nine months plus two weeks to know that my son was a son, despite the medical capacity to know sooner. And what great joy I found in that longing: a new (and successful) experiment in patience. A wonder like I had never experienced. An indescribable joy to meet my son. And miracle of miracles, I found equal joy and wonder in longing during my wife's second pregnancy—greeting our second son after another round of nine months and two week's anticipation.

Advent—or the 40-day Nativity Fast as it is traditionally known in the Orthodox Churches—is one of God's annual gifts to us through the Church: a gift of patience, anticipation, and longing leading to indescribable joy and wonder at our celebration of the nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Traditionally and historically, Christians prepare for feasts by fasting and repentance. After all, we can never truly know a feast until we know what it is to fast. To go from party to party with no rest in between is to live life ultimately numb to true celebration.

This sort of preparatory season is best known, of course, as the Great 40 days of

Lent prior to Pascha (Easter). But Advent is no different—though in many places fasting and penitence have slipped away, now only visible in the liturgical use of the color purple in churches and on Advent wreaths.

Advent, however, is devoted to preparation, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and spiritual longing. After all, it means “coming towards”. The Nativity of Christ is coming. What do you do when the king is coming and he is not here yet? Clean the house. Mend the torn garments. Polish the silver. Wash the dishes. Treat our neighbors the way we are supposed to. Make everything shiny and bright. Advent is not a feast. It is the preparation for the coming One.

So, how to prepare? Clean the house. Not just my residence, but the house of my soul. What sins do I keep unconfessed? What fire of anger do I stoke? What resentment do I harbor? With whom am I not reconciled?

Mend the torn garments. Not just patches on the knees of my torn jeans. How about the holes in the jeans of the needy? How about providing clothing for those who don’t have clothing to mend? Shoes for the shoeless? Meals for the hungry?

Polish the silver. Am I offering my best to the church? Am I giving the love and attention to my family and friends (and enemies) as I am called to do? What do I have to offer that I am holding back?

Wash the dishes. What or whom am I neglecting? Whom have I cast aside?



All this, of course, is not an end in and of itself. It is not a series of works and spiritual housecleaning in order to pat oneself on the back and say, “Atta boy!” or, “You go, girl!” Rather it is the response, in love, to the King of Kings who is coming into this world to save us.

Prepare the way of the Lord—he is coming to be born, and to be reborn in our hearts. So, let’s save the carols for Christmas. Let’s save the partying for the feast which begins with Communion on Christmas Day. For the coming weeks, let’s prepare ourselves, our souls and bodies, in peace and repentance, for the Nativity of Christ.

“Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants” (Luke 12:35ff)!

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