

“Be Prepared!”

Matthew 24:36-44

News anchor, Dan Rather, grew up in the same neighborhood as the Flying Valentis; the world-famous family troupe of circus acrobats. He writes, “Walking past a vacant lot on our way to school early in the morning, my friends and I would come across the Flying Valentis practicing in their long tights and tank tops.”

“Although we were used to their art,” he recalls, “the Flying Valentis never ceased being the wonder of the neighborhood. Every morning it was like getting invited to a great show without having to buy a ticket. They did triple somersaults above their practice nets and caught each other by the forearms while swinging from the trapeze,” (as they prepared for their coming performances.)

Rather learned, though, that while it might have been a lot of fun, it took dedication. “When we traipsed back from school in the afternoon the Valentis were still swinging away from their nets, and when they returned from a tour looking banged up and limping with limbs in casts, we could see that a price had to be paid for fame.” He says that this taught him that preparation is necessary for any real excellence in life. “Their standard of dedicated preparation would have been good preparation for survival in the acrobatics of network television.”, he says. Rather raises a great point about anything worthwhile needing preparation.

Well, something worthwhile is coming, and if we would experience it well, preparation will be required. Advent is now upon us. The word Advent means “a coming.” More specifically, it means “The Coming”; The Coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. Advent is a time of preparation for that coming. It is the time when we look back and prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of our Savior in long-ago Bethlehem. But, just as

our reading from The Gospel According to Matthew reminds us this morning, it is also the time to look forward and prepare for the day when Jesus will come back. That is what our passage directs our attention to; Christ's return to us. We are not told when this event will happen, but we are assured that it will happen.

Now, I have just one point to make about all this, this morning, and it is this: Be Prepared! The best way to get prepared to celebrate Jesus' birth, and stay prepared for his return, is this; tune your heart to the thoughts of God. Jesus makes this point by reminding his disciples of the example of Noah. Noah was in- tune with God. His neighbors were not. Noah obeyed God and began preparing for the flood by building an ark in fair weather. Noah's neighbors thought he was crazy. But Noah was in-tune. We are to be in-tune as well Jesus is saying.

Preparing to get in-tune, reminds me of something that happened a while back. It was just a few weeks before Christmas. Eight-year-old David and two of his classmates were asked by David's mother, "What Holiday songs are you preparing to sing in your classroom this year?" David, looking down at his feet replied, "Teacher says we can't sing well enough. She's only going to let kids sing in the Holiday show who can carry a tune." David's mother could sense the hurt in her son's voice. She was hurt herself at the teacher's remark. She asked, "How'd you like to practice your song with me?" David and his friends agreed, and they began practicing the song their class was preparing to sing at the Holiday program. Every class had been assigned a different song representing each of the various religions and ethnic backgrounds of the students in the school. There would be secular songs, and songs for Chanukah, as well as Ramadan and Kwanza, and yes, Christmas. Everyone would celebrate everyone's holiday. The school board and the PTA had cleared it as a "Shared multi-cultural Celebration."

David's class had been assigned It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. His mom was grateful that it was one she knew. But as they practiced, she began to think that perhaps the teacher had been right. These boys could not carry a tune. That evening, after the children had gone to bed, she told her husband, "You never heard anything like it in your whole life. Never! You can't imagine what it was like!" Her husband replied, "Oh, yes I can, too. There are people, you know, who really can't carry a tune."

"What's the use of trying to do what you can't do?" she exclaimed with not a little exasperation. The next morning, while shopping, she bought two books on teaching music to children. They practiced from that afternoon until the night of the Holiday program. She adapted and invented musical games to help teach the boys. She was patient with them. Slowly, gradually, they began to sing on key, and were beginning to actually sound good. "It's not howling anymore. It's singing," David's mother observed. The improvement became so marked that by the night of the Holiday program David and his friends were allowed to sing with the rest of their class. They had tuned-in to the music through dedicated preparation. They had immersed themselves in it. The rest of the story in a moment...

That's what Advent is for; getting tuned-in; getting prepared for The Coming by tuning-in to the mind and heart of God. How do we do that? By immersing ourselves into God. By taking up a spiritual discipline, and practicing it until we get good at it. Here's a good place to start: pick up your Prayerbook and make a habit of praying through the Daily Office of Morning prayer each morning, or Evening Prayer each night. Do both if time and commitments allow, and, possibly, add the Noonday Prayer service as well as you start getting good at it. This dedication to prayer will immerse your spirit in God's spirit; get us tuned-in to God's mind and heart.

Another practice is to, dare I say it, pick up your Bible and commit to reading through the Gospel book of Matthew during Advent. And, if you get to the end before the end of Advent, take on the Gospel book of Luke also. These two Gospel books have the benefit of having all the good Christmas stories, as well as both versions of the Beatitudes. All good things to read in preparation for the Season.

As we begin the season of Advent and our new year of faith, adopt one Christian spiritual practice or discipline as a way of intentionally growing deeper into God. This is how to prepare and get in-tune.

And now, the rest of the story! The School's multicultural celebration went off well. All the preparation had paid-off; especially for David and his buddies who had finally tuned-in musically. But, there really is something more to be said. In the weeks of preparation, something else had tuned-in as well. Something else was stirring inside of David. A few nights after the Holiday program, David's mother was looking out the kitchen window when she spotted David standing knee deep in snow. He was just standing there looking toward the sky. When she stepped out, David came running to her. "It's so still," he said in a hushed voice that she had never heard from him before. "All those stars, they shine so. Do you remember, in the song, 'the world in solemn stillness lay?'"

The starlight shone down on David, revealing his features; his honest little-boy eyes wide, fixed trustingly on his mother's. In them she saw the miracle; the miracle of an awakening soul. David had not merely tuned-in to the music; his heart was now tuning-in to the presence of God.

Friends tune your heart and mind to God's thoughts in these weeks ahead. Prepare yourself for a miracle inside of you. Let Christmas awaken your soul. The Christ Child is coming. The Christ returns. Be Prepared!