

SERMON: December 2, 2018 First Sunday in Advent PREPARATION  
TEXT: Isaiah 40:1-5  
SUBJECT: Preparing for God's presence  
THEME: The first words of preparation are COMFORT -  
PURPOSE: That we would be a people of grace first.

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.

<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

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### ***How long does it take to prepare?***

**(NOTE – VARIOUS PICTURES OF OUR HOLIDAY ARTS FESTIVAL)**

At our "Holiday Arts Festival" yesterday we had over 200 people come through, starting at 10:00 in the morning. We had a prayer table, a children's activity center, live music, and a drawing of pieces of art from some of our vendors.

So what time did we start?

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We had listed in the newspaper and on Facebook and on all of the signage that we started at 10:00 AM – but that's not really when we started.

We had various people here at the church as early as 7:00, setting up tables, registering vendors, setting out the sound system and marking off parking areas. But we didn't start at 7:00 AM.

We had people over the past week going out and putting up signs, passing out flyers, buying food and water. But we didn't start just a week ago.

We have had meetings over the past couple of months, deciding what to put on the flyers and what are we going to serve to eat and where the exhibits should be and writing up press releases to send to all of the newspapers and radio station. But we didn't start just a couple of months ago.

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I first became involved with this back in August, when Carolyn Burger stopped by to tell me about what y'all have been doing every year, and what we wanted to do this year. And at that time we talked about what the purpose of the Holiday Arts Festival was – ***was our church just a convenient place to have hundreds of people come and see and buy art for the holidays, or did God have another reason for it to be held here?***

What if, instead of people just coming to look at art and enjoying a nice day in the Florida sun, God intended this as a way to offer His grace and hope to people?

We are a Church – we are the living Body of Jesus Christ. Our belief is that ***life without Jesus isn't worth living, and we want for more people to find out what true joy is all about!***

So events like this – an arts festival, a strawberry festival, Scouting, Mother's Morning Out – these are not just events that just happen to take place on our property; these are all ways that God can use to draw people to Himself, to offer hope and healing to His people.

People might have come, expecting to buy a nice piece of art or to earn a new merit badge, but our desire is that they meet Jesus.

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This first Sunday in Advent we are talking about ***PREPARATION***. These next 4 weeks are all about getting ready for the presence of God in our world!

You know, the world celebrates Christmas backwards. They spend all of their time and energy getting people excited and singing songs and going to parties – up until December 25<sup>th</sup> –

But then what happens?



[https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2016/12/06/14/41/new-years-day-1886627\\_960\\_720.jpg](https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2016/12/06/14/41/new-years-day-1886627_960_720.jpg)

They start getting ready for New Year's Day!

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But that's not the Christian calendar! We don't celebrate Christmas YET - we are in the time of Advent, of Preparation for the coming of the Lord. We celebrate Advent from now until December 24<sup>th</sup>, and THEN we have Christmas from December 25<sup>th</sup> until January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany!



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/XRF\\_12days.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/XRF_12days.jpg)

Have you ever heard of “The 12 Days of Christmas”? That's what it is! Christmas runs from December 25<sup>th</sup> until January 5<sup>th</sup>, and then it's Epiphany!

The world tries to turn Advent into Christmas – and then ignore it as soon as the presents are opened.

But we want to rediscover Advent, and to put it back into its proper place. THIS is the time of anticipation! THIS is the time of preparing! THIS is the time of getting everything ready to really celebrate once Christmas has come!

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Over the past few months we have been PREPARING for our Holiday Arts Festival. We've been planning, arranging, calling people up, organizing times and schedules and who works at which table.

***The point of preparation is so that, once the clock starts running, there are no distractions from what is truly important.***

At a wedding – you have months of preparation and calling of caterers and picking out bridesmaid's dresses and sending out invitations and everything else – but the most important part in my mind is the time I spend with the bride and groom in counseling sessions, helping them to prepare for the rest of their life together. The wedding only lasts 15-20 minutes; the marriage will last for the rest of their lives.

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Our goal for this Holiday Arts Festival was to open the door so that people could ask the questions of faith that they never had the chance to do before. The Arts Festival was just an evangelism tool to get people here so that God could love on them!

One of the things we did was to have a drawing for some very nice pieces of art that people could take home with them. In order to win they filled out a drawing ticket with their name, phone number, and e-mail address, and the question of whether they were a part of a church down here.

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We gave the tickets to anyone who wanted one, and what we are going to do now is, early this week, we are going to contact each person who filled out a ticket and thank them for coming, and ask if there is anything that we can be praying for for them.

And with their permission, we will put them on a mailing list so that they can hear about other events that will be here at our church. If they ask to come off, that's no problem, but this will give us a chance to love on them in Christ's name.

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I have done this at other churches where we have had events like this, and it is amazing how many people wants someone to talk to. We don't find that much in our world today. Everyone is so busy and we seem to have become more isolated than ever. We have self-checkout lines where we don't even HAVE to talk to another living person!

Our prayer, before the Arts Festival started, was, ***“Lord, use us to love someone in Your name today.”***

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“Comfort, O comfort My people, says the Lord.” That's our scripture for today. Isaiah had seen the people of God fall into terrible times. He started his ministry under the Assyrian occupation, and ended it under the fist of the Babylonians. In that time Isaiah saw good kings and bad; he saw priests who served the people faithfully and those who were just interested in making life comfortable for themselves.

But Isaiah also saw what God was doing. Even though things looked bad right now, Isaiah saw that God's heart is always towards His people. And so, through the prophecy, Isaiah saw that God was not going to leave His people in this misery forever. There would be one who would come and make things right.

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So Isaiah started preparing. Even though he would probably never see the end result, Isaiah decided in his time and age he would begin the process of healing.

That's what God is about – ever since the beginning, when we rebelled against God and lost our home in paradise, God has been trying to get us back. God is not satisfied with the brokenness in this world – He has set about to heal us. But He needs our participation.

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***So - whom do you know that needs healing?***

That's what this time of preparation is about – for us to focus on what's really important, and to make sure that nothing gets in the way of that when the clock starts running.

Right now, you can probably think of someone who is having a very difficult time right now. But I want for you to expand your vision, and look beyond just your current circle of friends.

I'm not telling you to neglect your friends, but ask God to open up your eyes, your ears, and your heart to someone else that everyone else seems to have forgotten.

There may be someone on your street who just lost a loved one, and this is going to be their first Christmas alone. It doesn't matter if they are a member of our church or not, or if they are even a Christian – how can God use you to love them?

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Maybe invite them over for Christmas dinner. Maybe offer to take their kids shopping, or take them to the Post Office so that they can mail gifts to their grandchildren.

Take a look around you and start trying to see what nobody else sees. Take a look at what annoys you – don't you hate it when you are trying to get somewhere, and you have to slow down to get through the "School Crossing" section?

Why don't you turn that into a blessing – volunteer with our tutoring group and get to know some of the children who cause you to be late to wherever you're going every morning!

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The point is, this is the celebration of Jesus' birthday, not yours. How are we using this opportunity to share His hope with the people around us?

But maybe I'm wrong about this – maybe the world is already in perfect condition and God doesn't have to do anything. Maybe everyone already has enough to eat and feels safe sleeping at night. Maybe businesses cooperate together and customers always get the best quality at fair prices.

Maybe people of different religions or political backgrounds already treat each other with love and respect, and grace abounds to all. Maybe governments see their citizens as a God-given blessing whom they should serve, and all churches are more interested in reaching the lost than they are in taking care of themselves.

Maybe all people feel safe in their own homeland, and evil has been defeated.

Do we live in that world yet?

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Isaiah says that there will come a time when God will make all things new – and until then, we are to prepare.

And this preparation begins with us comforting those who feel lost.

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God has given you and I a ***mission this Advent – to seek out those who are struggling, and to offer them hope.***

We started some of that yesterday. Now I challenge you to be involved -

Start expecting that God is going to put people in your path that He wants to show His love to. It's amazing what you will start noticing when you begin your day with that expectation!

“God, whom do You want to love through me today?”

And when you do it, let me know! Send me an e-mail or write me a note here at the church office! I want to hear how God is using you to prepare hearts for His coming! I want to use your stories in the sermons and in my writings to encourage other people to get involved, too!

You have a mission. You have a God who is not satisfied with the way this world is yet.

Let us let Him, through these next 4 weeks, work through us.

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