Sunday, December 14, 2003
HOW TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS
Luke 3:7-14

According to the story in Luke's gospel, the main assignment given to John the Baptist was to prepare the people of his time for the reception of God's Savior. He certainly got their attention. His preaching was so effective that they asked him, "What should we do?" His answer was very specific and practical. He did not tell them that if they wanted to be ready to receive God's Savior they should move to Jerusalem, where the Temple was located. Nor did he encourage them to move to the wilderness, where he lived, and go on a long spiritual retreat. He did not tell them they should quit their jobs and spend more time in prayer and reflection. He did not tell them to begin their Christmas shopping before all the bargains were gone.

He said, "Whoever has two coats must give to someone who has none; and whoever has food must do the same." To the tax collectors of his day, who tended to be dishonest, he said: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To those who were tempted to be corrupt in their dealings because of their position of authority, he said: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages."

Here's my paraphrase of John's answer for you today. If you truly want to prepare for the reception of God's saving presence in your midst — if you want to experience God's love and have it flow through you — then you need to make the most of the present moment. Live honorably and with integrity right now. Practice kindness every day. Be thankful.

Mother Teresa put it this way: "Spread love wherever you go; first of all in your own house. Give love to your neighbor, to your wife or husband, to your children, to the next-door neighbor. Let no one ever come to you without leaving feeling better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greetings."

Now contrast this advice on how to prepare for Christmas with some that is given to you from other sources in today's world. A recent feature story in The Wall Street Journal called this year's Christmas "THE ME CHRISTMAS." The article said, "This holiday, retailers want you to put someone special at the top of your gift list: you." Then it gave a number of examples. "Amy White is getting an early start on her Christmas shopping list. The St. Louis attorney has already picked out a Harry Potter DVD, a $70 coffee-table book, and a $39 Victoria's Secret sweater. There's even a $625 purple vase on the list. And the lucky recipient? Ms. White herself."

The article continued: "With Christmas 2003 promising to deliver the first big shopping season in years, retailers are targeting the most important person on your shopping list: you. In case you can't afford to buy yourself all the gifts you think you deserve, many of the large retailers are making available electronic gift registries as a way to help your friends get you the gifts you think you deserve. A new service offered by online shopping retailers is to let shoppers pick out things for themselves, then send friends and families to a website where they can just click to buy you exactly the things you've asked for. It's a new form of the registration lists that brides have used for years."

I think it's kind of humorous, and I'm convinced that very few people who are trying to follow the Christian way will be influenced by this fad. I've discovered over the years that people in

this congregation are very generous, not only during the Christmas season but all year long. You respond to people's needs when you become aware of them. You do not put yourself at the top of your shopping list.

The biggest temptation for most people in preparing for Christmas is wanting to get there too quickly, without due preparation. When people ask me if I'm "prepared for Christmas," I don't know what they mean. Do I have all my shopping done? Have I collapsed yet from all the parties? Do I have the sermons prepared?

According to the Christian liturgical calendar, the season of preparation is a minimum of four weeks — it's called the season of Advent. Every year, church members will say to their ministers, "Why do we have to sing these Advent hymns?" People want to begin singing Christmas carols immediately as soon as Thanksgiving is over. They want to skip Advent.

Family traditions vary on this issue. I grew up with a family tradition that said you did not put up your Christmas tree or any Christmas lights until the morning of December 24. The tree was then decorated on Christmas Eve, and gifts were exchanged on Christmas Day morning. My wife grew up with a different tradition, so we've had to work out some compromises. I now put up many of the lights and the tree earlier but call them "Advent decorations" until Christmas Eve. Then they magically change into Christmas decorations.

The wider culture outside the church wants to rush to Christmas more quickly than ever. Years ago, stores did not put out their Christmas merchandise until after Thanksgiving. Now Christmas decorations appear, Christmas merchandise is put on the shelves, and advertisements begin weeks before that. I understand why that's done, and I know it's not going to change very much, if at all. I simply want to say to you, relax, take it easy — you do not have to be caught up in the frenzy unless you choose to do so. Enjoy the season of Advent. Do not try to rush the season. On the other hand, if you truly enjoy the frenzy and the stress, that's your problem.

One of my favorite authors is an Episcopalian minister, Barbara Brown Taylor. In a recent essay, she told about learning how not to rush things from watching the hatching of guinea hen eggs on their little farm in Georgia, where she and her husband live. Sometimes the lessons God wants you to learn come from unusual teachers.

She said the last time one of her guinea hens hatched her own chicks, they were gone in two days because of predators. Guinea hens are not very good mothers after the eggs are hatched, although the hens are very careful in protecting the eggs before they are hatched.

So Barbara and her husband Ed formed a plan. They would let the hen set on her eggs right up until the last week, then they would steal the eggs, hatching them in a borrowed incubator. One day her husband Ed called Barbara at work and told her, "If you want to be here to see the eggs hatch, you better come home because the eggs are cheeping." When she came into the shed where the incubator was and when her husband opened the lid, she could hear the ten sealed eggs talking to each other.

About an hour later, there was a commotion inside one cream-colored egg, and a crack appeared across the top of it. An hour after that, a piece of shell flew across the incubator, and a half-hour later, a wet little guinea hen flung one orange leg outside the shell and unfolded into the light.

Over the next 12 hours, nine more did the same thing, although not with as much aplomb. The last chick had such a hard time leaving the shell that a piece of it dried to her head, trapping her half in and half out. The cardinal rule of being a bird mother is that you cannot help because the fight to escape the shell somehow kick-starts all of a chick's systems. Those that cannot manage by themselves may die anyway, but if you help them, you wreck their odds.

Barbara said that it was one of the most agonizing tests a minister, a parent, or anyone with goodwill had to endure. She had to sit there in her imaginary straitjacket and watch the chick struggle while her shell hardened around her. The chick's labors grew weaker as she continued to work. Finally, she put her head down on the plastic shelf of the incubator and did not try anymore. Assuming the chick was dying, Ed lifted it, shell and all, and placed her in the straw-lined wooden box with her siblings. Huddled under a 60-watt light bulb, they were in constant motion, all climbing on top of one another as they tried to get closest to the light.

When the trapped chick heard them cheeping, she cheeped too, and when she did, the heads of the others swiveled in her direction. They were calling out to her, and the sound gave her new energy. She lifted her head off the straw, shuddered all over, and heaved free. On orange rubber legs, she staggered over to the pile of warm feathers and dove underneath them, leaving her old shell behind her like a shroud.

The other babies welcomed her by treading on her. This looked harsh, but it turned out to be what she needed. With nine pairs of chick feet, they dried and revived her better than any Swedish masseur could have done. A blob of bloody tissue hung from her body that looked ominous, but her broodmates pecked at it until it was all gone, leaving nothing to distinguish her from the rest of them.

Within an hour, the chicks were all eating green clover and biddie mash. One by one, they walked over to the red plastic water trough and sipped from it as if they had studied instructions on its use while in the shell. None of them asked for a chaplain. They did not even need a mother. Barbara wrote that her job, as it turned out, was not to crack shells, extract chicks, dry their feathers, or pour food into their mouths. Her job was simply to make a safe place, keep the predators away, and wait — and let the community do what it knew how to do. She said she hoped she would remember this the next time she wanted to rush in too quickly to save someone.

It's a good lesson in how to prepare for Christmas, for the continual entry of God into your life. You cannot force it. Don't try to rush it. Maybe you need to let Christmas come to you rather than trying to get to Christmas. You can create a loving atmosphere, a safe place, but you cannot cause it to happen before everything is ready. The Bible says, "God's ways are not always our ways." You cannot do everything yourself — you have to let the community do its work, and sometimes it will not appear to be perfect, but a little messy.

I say this because another cause of stress for some people in their preparing for Christmas, in addition to trying to rush things, is their desire to have the "perfect Christmas"—a Martha Stewart Christmas — where the decorations are perfect, a time where everyone in the family is totally pleased with their gifts, and there are no arguments or hurt feelings or disagreements. No one is going to take any gifts back for exchange or refund. It would be the perfect Christmas if the children in the family did not feel that one or more of their siblings got more than they did, a Christmas with no resentment or jealousy. Remember, things do not have to be perfect to be good.

The strangest day of all is the day after Christmas. The presents have all been opened. You have cleaned up all the wrapping paper. You realize the dishes still need to be done, and you are still worried about whether or not to move your grandmother into a nursing home.

How to prepare for Christmas: avoid trying to rush things too much. You cannot control everything. Don't worry if everything is not perfect. Remember, God is patient with growing things, especially human beings who are created in God's image. God is no stranger to chaos and incompleteness and is willing and able to work with you through your attempts, fresh starts, your mistakes, and your failures toward a more perfect day.

Perfection is not a life requirement for those who know the unconditional love of God. Move beyond your past and present mistakes and failures — God already has. It's so easy to carry your mistakes, grudges, and regrets into your Christmas celebrations. Develop an attitude of "holy carelessness." Do your best and leave the rest to God. And above all, practice kindness.

A woman called her minister during this season and at great length told him about her preparing-for-Christmas problem. Briefly, her story was this: she married a man slightly older than herself. He had always lived with his mother, and his mother continues to live with them. They are planning a Christmas party. Was it necessary for her to include her live-in mother-in-law and her friends at their Christmas party? That was her "big" preparing-for-Christmas problem. It makes you wonder whether the birth of Jesus has made any difference in people's lives. In spite of all the trivialities that bother people, I believe God's entering the world has made and is still making a difference. Amen.