

Calvin College Institute in Christian Worship
Worship Formation Program Lilly Grant
Advent Service Homily
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Be on the Alert! An Advent Meditation

Be on the alert! Be ready! Be sober minded! Be spotless. Be blameless!

Yes, that's right. Be on the alert. Be ready. Be sober minded. Be blameless.

These are the exhortations, indeed, the warnings, given by Jesus and the apostolic authors in the New Testament to help believers prepare for the second coming of Christ. They are entirely appropriate for this Advent season.

Now the theme of Advent is waiting in joyful hope, and its mood is one of expectation and anticipation — all for the coming of the Messiah, the Savior, the Servant of Yahweh, into the world.

But as you know, Advent has a dual focus. We certainly center our attention during this special time of the year on the past, on how the people of God in history prepared for the first coming of Christ. We also are to be mindful that Christ is coming again, and that as the present people of God we need to be preparing for Christ's advent yet a second time.

Biblical scholars and theologians speak frequently about Jesus and His kingdom redemption as both "already" but "not yet." His one redemptive work comes in two basic stages, in both a first and second advent. Christ has come and Christ is coming again. He came as suffering Lamb, He will return as roaring Lion. So, just as the Israel of God of old was waiting in joyful hope, expectantly, for Messiah's coming, so we as the Israel of God today also are waiting in joyful hope, expectantly, for His return. Preparation must be made for both.

Be on the alert! Be ready! Be sober minded! Be spotless. Be blameless!

But are we? Are we really *alert*, watchful and *ready*, clear-headed and responsive, praying for and anticipating the return of our Lord at any moment? Are we ready spiritually and morally to meet Him face to face? What if He were to come today or tonight, perhaps before this day is over? Have we kept short

accounts with God? Are we showing ourselves to be sober minded, taking the things of our faith seriously, and deliberately growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

Hear the words of Jesus Himself, and the apostles Paul and Peter on this matter of advent preparation, that is, second-advent, preparation. First we have these words of Jesus in Luke 12: 35-40 (NASB).

"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight. "And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find **on the alert** when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. "Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. "And be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. "You too, **be ready**; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

Now St. Paul writes these words in 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-8 (NASB).

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, **but let us be alert and sober**. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of {the} day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

Finally, St. Peter asserts this in 2 Peter 3: 10-15 (NASB).

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, **what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness**, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, **be diligent to**

be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation....

So, in combing through these texts from Jesus, Paul and Peter, we find these words encouraging us to be advent **ready**, advent **alert**, advent **sober**, advent **spotless** and advent **blameless**.

The question, again, for all of us is this: are we? Speaking for myself and possibly for you also, we are not really ready. I need to repent. You might need to as well.

This is why many churches, especially the Orthodox, consider Advent not only a season of waiting in joyful hope, but also as a time to repent, as a yearly season of careful examination of heart and life in order to be ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the three purple candles of the Advent wreath, though they can symbolize many things and do in various settings, also stand for repentance. The fourth pink candle stands for joy. Repentance and joy, that's what Advent is really all about at its core.

Repentance, of course, signifies the whole process of meaningful change. It stems from a serious fear of God. It entails deep sorrow for sins committed against God and humanity and for their costly consequences. It involves the confession of these sins, and a profound inward alteration of mind, affections, and convictions. By the Spirit's power, repentance results in lasting change in character and conduct, a bringing forth of fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3: 8). Isaiah 55: 6-7 states:

“Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.”

The result of such repentance is genuine joy. Joy in being forgiven. Joy in being at peace with God. Joy in being reconciled with your neighbor whom you have offended. Joy in being advent ready for our Lord's return.

This Advent 2003, God might be calling each of us to examine our own lives and to repent: (1) of faulty, unbiblical ways of thinking that are more in keeping with our surrounding culture than with Scripture, (2) of disordered loves and affections for things like the self, possessions, food, and sex out of which we have made idols, and (3) of things we have done that we should not have done (like gossiping or lying), and of things we have left undone that we should have done (like showing mercy to the poor), sins of commission and sins of omission that damage our testimony before a watching world.

If we practice repentance this Advent season, we know that God will have compassion and will abundantly pardon, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ our Lord which He accomplished on behalf of the whole creation and our own at His first Advent.

Then we will have Advent joy, awaiting the return of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the one sitting upon a white horse whose is faithful and true, the Word of God who in righteousness judges and wages war, whose eyes are a flame of fire, who wears a crown of many diadems, whose robe is dipped in blood, who is accompanied by the armies of heaven, who smites the nations with His sword, who will rule with a rod of iron, who treads out the wine press of the fierce wrath of God almighty, whose kingdom shall have no end. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Be on the alert! Be ready! Be sober minded! Be spotless. Be blameless! Amen and amen.