

It is official. The Holidays have started. The Christmas Season is here. If you are one of the people who got up early on Friday morning to get in on those early bird specials, you know that this very busy, very stressful, very emotional time of the year has come. Just so you know, I did not get up early on Friday morning to go shopping. I did not want to be anywhere near a shopping center or big box store.

Even the church recognizes that this is a special time of the year. Today is the first day in Advent. If we think about this as the Advent Season rather than the Christmas Shopping Season, it may help us focus on the things that we really need to do. The word Advent means coming. During Advent we prepare to celebrate Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem and we prepare for His Second Coming. For the next four weekends, we are going to think about Advent as time to Listen, to Prepare, to See and to Rejoice.

I was standing in line at the post office on Wednesday to buy some stamps and heard the woman in front of me tell the Post Office Clerk that she was all stressed out because her hamster was sick. After the woman left, the clerk told me that he hears all kinds of things. I don't doubt it. If you are willing to listen, people are willing to talk. I've heard people's whole life stories while waiting in a checkout line. While a lot of people want to talk, fewer people are willing or even know how to really listen. You may be having trouble listening to me already.

Advent is a time to listen. We need to listen, to listen to the voice of Jesus. On the mount of the Transfiguration, when Jesus appeared in His heavenly glory with Moses and Elijah, the voice of God the Father spoke to Peter, James and John from heaven and said, "**This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!**" (Mark 9:7) Jesus repeatedly told His disciples and the people who came to see Him to "Listen!"

Sometimes there is just too much noise to listen. We are bombarded with noise today. Kids are hitting us with their Christmas lists. Ads are trying to entice us into stores. Invitations for Christmas events and parties come far too often. Christmas music is everywhere. The economic news is overwhelming. Most of us have bailout burnout. On top of that, it is hard to listen when you're worried about your job, your retirement, your health, your family.

With so much noise and confusion in the air, it is hard to discern the voice of the Lord. Do you ever have trouble telling whether God is talking with you or someone else? Do God want you to do something or is someone putting words in God's mouth. How do you discern the voice of God? Even if you recognize God's voice, do you really understand what He is saying? While some people in Jesus' day rejected Him as a false Messiah, others only heard the things that they wanted to hear. Only a few really listened to Jesus, believed Him and followed Him.

What are you getting ready for this time of the year: Family, Friends, a trip? Since this will be the first Christmas with two of our kids away to college, we are preparing for their Christmas home coming. We put up outside decorations a couple weeks ago. The Christmas tree and inside decorations are going up soon so that everything is ready when the kids come home. Maybe your focus is on a big party or on the Christmas gifts you plan to give this year.

Christmas is the celebration of the gift of God's Son, God with us to rescue us from the consequences of our sin. Jesus showed us that the greatest things in life are to love the Lord God and to love others. We can prepare to celebrate God's gift of love by truly loving those around us. We can prepare to celebrate Christmas by giving ourselves to others. We can prepare to celebrate Christmas by listening to Jesus, taking His words to heart, and letting them transform our lives. Jesus doesn't want us to "look like church people," He wants us to imitate Him, to follow His example of sacrificial love, forgiving and serving others.

But that is not all. We also need to prepare for the Lord's return. Followers of Jesus listen to Him. Before Jesus told stories about his second coming, He told the disciples to listen. Listen! The Lord is coming again and He wants us to be ready. Listen! The Lord says that whatever we do to help someone else, whatever we do for those in need, we do for Him. Listen, He warns us not to become so distract by everything going on around us that we let our faith grow dim.

So what should we listen to? It is time to listen to God's prophetic voice. The Old Testament Prophets had two important messages to bring to the people. Most of us think of the prophecies of the future, predicting that the Savior would come, that He would be born in Bethlehem, the son of a Virgin. That was only part of their message. The prophets also spoke to the people of their day. They called them to lives of faith and faithful.

What does the prophetic voice say to us today? We find that voice in God's word that calls us to love and forgive others. God's voice also calls us to trust Him and to bring all of our cares and concerns to Him. When we trust God more and worry less, we can do a better job of listening to the Lord. God's voice also urges us to get our priorities straight. Jesus said, **"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need."** (Luke 12:31 NLT)

It is also time to listen to the message of Hope. We live in a time when so many people are depressed, discouraged. People are looking to politicians or to government bailouts to turn things around. But are they looking in the right place? Jesus Christ is the Hope of the World. When our hope is in the Lord, we will not be disappointed because Jesus entered our world at Christmas, died on the cross for us on Good Friday, and rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. If you're hoping for a big flat screen TV for Christmas you may be disappointed, but if your hope is in the love of the Lord, you will never be disappointed.

One more thing, it is time to listen to the promise of a bright future. God has good things in store for His people. When Christ returns, He will take His people home with Him to live with Him in heaven. Heaven is the place where our perfect relationship with God is restored. Heaven is the place where there will be no more sorrow or suffering. We do have hope because we have something to look forward to. Jesus always keeps His promises, so listen to Him. Amen.