

I want to begin my wishing you a happy New Year. The first Sunday of Advent gives us the opportunity to reflect on our lives. Like that other "new year," we make decide to make some resolutions about the coming year and how we want to grow. Making a change means taking some time to plan what we want to do and how we're going to accomplish it. Making a change is more than simply crossing our fingers and wishing that something will happen.

Advent is a time of change, not so much a time of preparation for Christmas -- that's an event in the past. Advent is more about the preparation for the coming of Jesus -- that's an event in our future. How am I going to get ready, so that I'm prepared when Jesus comes again?

It's like the difference between preparing for a wedding and preparing for marriage. One is a social event for a day; the other is a relationship for a lifetime. Both are necessary but we must be careful not to confuse them. The same is true with Advent -- it's a time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas, which is one day. But it's more a time to take stock of my life, and how I'm spending my time, and how I'm going to continue to push myself to grow.

Here are a few ideas about how to use the time of Advent. To help remember, I picked words to go with the four candles of the wreath. There are three "P" words for the three purple candles, and a word that's an "R" or "P," depending on whether you call the last candle rose or pink.

The first P is Prepare. Of course, there's lots to do with running, shopping, cooking, and cleaning. Maybe it's good that we're so busy, because the days are becoming shorter and darker, and they tend to make us want to slow down, cuddle up, and hibernate. But the Gospel reminds us to be alert and not get caught sleeping. Advent is the time to prepare for the second coming, when I see God face-to-face, and God asks me how I spent my time, will I have a good answer? I have had a lifetime -- no matter how long or short it may be, a lifetime -- to prepare to answer that question. How have I spent my time? How am I preparing to meet the Lord face to face?

The second P is Prayer. I believe if we seriously take time to pray during Advent it will help us keep things in focus. Will begin to realize that there are more important things to do, and if some of the menial tasks don't get done, so what? Prayer helps us keep our minds focused on the most important things, and less on the trivial things. I believe it's mostly a mental attitude, but I'm not going to be frantic, that I'm not going to be frustrated, but I will enjoy the time I have and use it well to the best of my ability. You're probably get just as much or even more done instead of running around like a chicken with its head cut off. We'll encounter God not only in the future, but every day in our prayer.

Third week of Advent has a Pink or Rose candle, so you can choose Patience or Relaxing. Who wants to be around you during Advent if all you do is complain about how much you have to do? If you don't relax, you'll be ready for the big day all right, but it will sound like "I'm ready for it to be over" or "Thank God Christmas is out of the way for another year." [That's not really what we're going for!] Be patient, relax, and enjoy this time of waiting. Advent is not a war to be waged; it's a time of hopeful anticipation, knowing that we're going to meet our God, now and in the future.

The fourth P is Penance. The season of Advent is an opportunity for Penance = to turn away from a focus on myself and show more than my average concern for others. With all the parties and food and drink of this season, there are also many opportunities for self-denial. With all the receiving and giving, we can go beyond the internal dialogue, "What do I want for Christmas?" There are also plenty of chances to think about someone besides ourselves. How can I help others encounter Jesus' love through my actions? How can I spread the good news that Jesus will come again?

As we enter Advent, we could pick one of these themes every week. Or you could pick just one for the entire season.

Advent is a wonderful season -- a time for Preparation, Prayer, Patience, and Penance. Christ is here; and Christ will come again. Are you ready?