

Isaiah 60:2–3

²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 64:1–9

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19 (UMH 801)

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

³Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24–37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

People Get Ready

Last year someone found a suspicious device in a Philadelphia train station. Only two months earlier, terrorist bombs had killed hundreds in Madrid train stations, so railroads around the world were on the alert. When someone spotted the device in Philadelphia, police and FBI agents descended on the train station. The device appeared to be a

transmitter, but they couldn't figure out its purpose. Finally, a train mechanic confessed. The device was a motion detector. The mechanic had configured it to warn him when anyone entered his work area so that he could nap without being discovered.

Get ready! Get ready for a visit by the boss! That is the message of today's scripture reading from the Gospel of Saint Mark. That is the message of Advent.

The word advent comes from the Latin, *adventus*, which means "coming." In the four Sundays of Advent, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas -- and for the coming of Christ at the end of time.

It is easy to get enthused for the coming of Christ at Christmas, because there are so many reminders -- Christmas music -- Christmas parties -- Christmas decorations -- Christmas wish lists.

Unfortunately, it isn't really easy to get ready for Christmas. How do you find the right presents for everyone on your list? How do you find time to trim the tree -- to decorate the house -- to cook a big Christmas dinner? Every year about this time, I get tired just thinking about it.

It is easy to get so caught up in the busyness of the season that we find that we have no time left for Jesus. Millions of people celebrate Christmas without Christ. We have to be careful so that we don't find ourselves among them. But, if getting ready for the coming of Christ at Christmas is difficult, it is even harder to get ready for the coming of Christ at the end of time. Christmas is a happy time, and we enjoy preparing for it. But how many of us are looking forward to the Second Coming of Christ? Not many, I'll bet.

I don't know about you, but the thought of standing before God giving an account of my life and my actions is more than a bit scary. I am afraid that when Jesus comes again and separates the sheep from the goats, that I may be in the wrong group of animals. I have faith and I have hope, but when it all comes down to it, it is still scary.

I saw a cartoon: A man is wearing a sandwich board that says:
The end of the world is coming! Start plea bargaining!

Advent serves two functions: It looks backward to the original birth of Christ that we celebrate on Christmas Day, and it looks forward to a second event that we commonly call the Second Coming of Christ. In several parables, Jesus talks about being ready for his return. Let's not end up like those in several of his parables who either fell asleep or lost interest while waiting. Because Christ is surely coming again!

I found a nice story about John Grisham. Grisham is a lawyer and writes novels from a legal point of view. They are really popular. You may have read one of his books. But what I read about Grisham surprised me. It said that he takes his faith seriously -- and that he tries to focus his life on the things that really count.

Grisham attributes that attitude to something that happened while he was still a law-school student. A friend -- a young man -- called and invited Grisham to lunch. At lunch, he told Grisham that he had cancer. He didn't have long to live. Grisham was stunned. He asked, "What do you do when you realize that you are about to die?"

His friend replied:

"It's real simple. You get things right with God, and you spend as much time with those you love as you can. Then you settle up with everybody else."

And then he added:

"You know, really, you ought to live every day like you have only a few more days to live."

Grisham never forgot his friend's words.

"You know, really, you ought to live every day like you have only a few more days to live."

You never know when something will happen.

It happened in the mountains of Pakistan. October, 2005. A massive earthquake struck and 80,000 people were killed instantly. The end came so suddenly, so quickly, so silently, like a thief in the night.

It happened right after last Christmas in South East Asia. The tsunami wave. We all know what the word "tsunami" means now. That wave rolled silently across that part of the world and hundreds of thousands were left dead or homeless in a moment of rushing water and sudden death.

Suddenly, all of life happens too suddenly, doesn't it? And Jesus said to all people of all ages, the end will come so suddenly; live today as if you were going to meet God face-to-face tomorrow.

There's an old song from the 60's by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, called "People Get Ready". I don't know if Curtis Mayfield wrote the song, or whether he was recording his version of another person's song. The first verse of the song goes like this:

*"People get ready, there's a train a coming
you don't need no baggage, you just get on board,
All you need is faith to hear the diesel's humming,
Don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord."*

What does it mean to be ready? Well here are four ideas.

The first is this: to live with the assurance that we are children of God, that if we died today, that we would know for sure, without a trace of doubt, that we will be with Jesus Christ. This readiness is a confidence, an assurance, an awareness that God is gracious, that I am a child of God, that God truly knows my first, middle and last name. That my salvation does not rest on my good behavior, my good theology, or my good denominational pedigree. None of these. That I know for sure that I am a child of God loved eternally by God.

I think of the thief on the cross. Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." It's done. No works righteousness. Nothing he can do. No religious pedigree. Pure grace. And God says that to us as well, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

When there is a children's sermon where someone ask the little children, "*Do you know what will happen if your mother or daddy dies?*" The little children all know the answer; "*My mom and dad will be with Jesus in heaven.*" "*How about you if you die? Where will you be?*" The little children know the answer; they know the truth; in heaven. When we become older children and adults, we tend to make it more complicated. The first component of getting ready is to trust God like little children.

A second quality of readiness to meet God face to face is to be a person of love. To be a person of love with your nearest and dearest, with your husband and wife, sons or daughters, your moms, your dads, your closest friends, strangers and others in need. If you are going to die tomorrow, why would you want to have a big fight with your spouse today? If you are going to die tomorrow, why would you want to neglect your child today? If you are going to die tomorrow, why do you want to allow that conflict to perpetuate itself today? If you are going to die tomorrow, why do you want to allow that conflict to simmer?

To live as if I am going to meet God face-to-face tomorrow is not only to avoid doing the

negative things, but to do the positive things. I not only avoid having a fight with my spouse, but I do something nice for her today. Isn't it a pleasure to do something wonderful, tender and nice for your spouse, your parents, your children, or even that person that you have a conflict with? To have this sense of readiness: to be a person of love.

A third quality of this readiness is to do the job. To do the tasks that God has given you to do. Personally, I have added up the roles that God has given me to do, and I think that I have eleven or twelve roles that I do. Hear me out. I am a husband to a wife. I am a father or stepfather to three children. I am a grandparent to three grandchildren, and I hope eventually to more. I am a son to my mother and father. I am a brother to my brother and sister. I am uncle to a couple of nephews. I am a cousin to my five cousins and a nephew to half a dozen aunts and uncles. I am an occasional preacher to this congregation. I am a friend to a whole bunch of people. I am a neighbor to many people on our street and neighborhood. I am a citizen of Salt Lake City, Utah, and the United States of America. I am a member of the human race of about six billion people. I am an electrical engineer for the United States government and a caretaker of this planet Earth.

Plus I have many more jobs and roles that I haven't mentioned but that God wants me to do. To live with a sense of readiness is to do my many jobs; it is to do the several tasks that God has given to me to do. With integrity. And to do these jobs in such a way that God will be proud. To do it in such a way that if God sees me tomorrow face-to-face, God will say, "*Good job. Good job that you did yesterday.*" To live your life in such a way that God would be proud of the way that you are living your life. Well done my good and faithful servant.

The fourth quality of this sense of readiness to meet God face to face is to be loyal to the values of Jesus Christ. To be loyal to a sense of love, justice and compassion, to always have a special concern and action for the poor. In the book of Romans, it says to the Christians, "*Knowing that the time is coming near, don't do what the world is doing.*" There are to be no orgies, no drunkenness, no sexual immorality, no sexual indecency, no fighting, no jealousy. Don't do these things. For Christ is coming soon; Christ is coming to meet you tomorrow; and if Christ is coming to meet you tomorrow, live and cling to the values of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Don't embarrass Christ with your behaviors; live life so Christ will be proud of you.

I found the words to an African-American spiritual. I don't know the tune, but the words to the song are like poetry. I would like to read it to you.

There's a king and captain high, And he's coming by and by, And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

You can hear his legions charging in the regions of the sky, and he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

There's a man they thrust aside, Who was tortured till he died, And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

He was hated and rejected, He was scorned and crucified, And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

When he comes! When he comes! He'll be crowned by saints and angels when he comes, They'll be shouting out Hosanna to the man that men denied, And I'll kneel among my cotton when he comes.

I hope that we will be ready when that train pulls in to the station. I hope Jesus will find us kneeling among the cotton when he comes.

Amen.