

This week we begin a new church year.

We begin with Advent, the season of preparation and expectation.

We look forward to commemorating a great event in God's relationship with human beings: we prepare to celebrate that God became human like us in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate with great joy, we remember that the Incarnation, God made flesh, is part of a longer story of salvation. A story that goes into the distant past and into the future.

As we lit the first candle in the Advent wreath this morning, we recalled the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament, key figures in the story of God's people. We especially recall the lives and actions of Abraham and Sarah, but we also remember Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob (also known as Israel) with Leah and Rachel who gave birth to the namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel. These are people who trusted God through all sorts of experiences. They weren't always sure what God was planning, and they may have even been impatient at times, but through them God continued a connection with humanity.

These core characters of the stories in Genesis are the foundation of what comes later.

They are part of the history that Jesus is born into.

They are part of our spiritual inheritance.

Through the descendants of these matriarchs and patriarchs comes an understanding that God cares about humanity. God cares about what we do and how we act. God cares about how we treat each other as fellow human beings.

There are many expectations around this time of year. As a community and a society there are lots of formalities and conventions that we are expected to observe and participate in during the month of December.

Some of them are well intentioned enough, such as spending time with family, but what's wrong with doing that all year round? Why save that particular expectation for Christmas?

The expectation to gather as a family can be a time of great fun and happiness, and I myself really look forward to our traditional family lunch on Christmas day.

But it is important to remember that not all families get on.

Not all families are in healthy relationship, and the pressures of this time of year can add to the stress and anxiety that is already present, and the joy of Christmas is diminished.

Some families will gather this Christmas, and for the first time a loved one will not be there, having died during the year.

During a season when we are surrounded by lots of images of happiness, it can be difficult to let ourselves feel the melancholy or grief that is a natural part of getting used to an absence.

My exhortation to you, amidst all of these considerations, is to be kind to yourselves and accept that your experience is yours and that God is with you in it, whether you are feeling joyful or sad.

Our society is grappling with loneliness as a growing phenomenon, and this can feel all the more acute at a time when everyone is expected to be going to all sorts of functions and gatherings. Or, we can exhaust ourselves by going to lots of events and not really being able to spend quality time with anyone.

My request of you during this season of expectations is, be kind to each other and keep coming back to the expectations that really matter – God's expectations of us.

As Paul writes in the letter to the Thessalonians, he prays that that community of faith will grow in love for one another and in love for all.

Our God is a God of love, righteousness, and justice, and Jesus being born is a part of that overarching story.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus talks about the signs around the coming of the Son of Man, calling for his followers to be alert.

While I'm not sure Jesus' coming again will happen as literally as recorded in Luke's Gospel, I do know that this Advent season is an opportunity to be alert to the ways that we can welcome Jesus coming into our lives, our hearts, our minds. It is a chance to consider the ways that faith in Jesus shapes who we are and who we want to become.

As we prepare for Christmas, I invite you to consider the ways that you make room for Jesus in your lives, and I pray that others will also see Christ in what you say and what you do.

As we sing songs and read stories that anticipate Jesus coming into the world, we are called to remember that Jesus continues to be in the world, through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and through those of us who follow Jesus' teaching and strive to walk in his way.

Whether people are in church every week or only at Christmas, the message they hear should be the same: God is love and love came down at Christmas in the form of a human child. God became human for us out of love.

Through these weeks of Advent, we prepare to welcome afresh the God who took on flesh, became incarnate, and shared in our human lives.

Let us be prepared in these weeks of Advent to be expectant people who exist in the joy of knowing that God was, is, and will be with us, no matter what.

As you work your way through your Advent calendars, remember that at its heart, Christmas is a sign that God is with us in the myriad variety of experiences that is a human life.

Be loving to your fellow human beings and do not let the unhelpful expectations of the season take over.

Be kind to your fellow human beings, be kind to yourselves, and enter into the anticipation of Christmas in full faith that Jesus, Emmanuel, 'God with us', is worth the waiting.

The Lord be with you.

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