



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson, Rector
Sermon for 2 Advent 2007
St. Mark's on the Campus
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Preparation is a major theme in our readings this morning, and I am guessing that most of us are deep in the midst of preparations. Preparing for final exams, either to give them or to take them. Preparing papers – to write them or read them.

And of course most of us are also in the preparations for Christmas: Buying gifts. Or thinking about buying gifts. Or thinking about thinking about buying gifts, depending on what stage of preparation we're in.

Whenever I think about preparing things, my mind goes to cooking and recipes. In my more pious moments I attribute my mind going to food to being a priest and being involved in the preparation of this meal for us each week. But really it has nothing to do with being a priest; I just like to eat! And to eat, sometimes I'm the one who prepares something to eat.

I am one of those people who prefers cooking to baking. I don't like the precision involved with baking. Everything has to be measured just so; and even then for some reason things don't always turn out the way I intend! Baking doesn't feel as creative to me as cooking does. Mind you, I'm very glad that there are people who enjoy *baking* because I enjoy *eating* what they bake!

But I prefer cooking, especially cooking meals in a pot: soups, stews, spaghetti sauces -- the sort of dishes where you combine a variety of ingredients together and don't worry about precision so much. You might even throw off a tried and true combination once in a while to try something new and see how it tastes. I like that kind of cooking because it's a bit different each time; it feels more creative to me.

Although I must admit that over the last few months I've started appreciating the feeling of cooking recipes where greater precision is called for and actually having those recipes come out successfully! I still don't find them as much fun to prepare -- but I am growing in my sense of appreciation for cooking with precision and the gifts that doing so brings.

As I was pondering all that this week, I wondered if there wasn't some metaphor in preparing food that can be used to bring light to our preparation for the coming of Christ in which we all are involved these days. I wondered if there isn't an analogous reality in the lives of Christians and the way we live into the faith that sustains us as we look ahead.

On the one hand, there are the bakers, the people who are into considerable precision and following a particular recipe for a faithful life. These might be those of us who closely analyze the Biblical text, seeking guidance for the way to live out our daily lives in as specific a way as possible. We might be the Christians who prepare for Christ by meticulously watching our behavior, trying to be as faithful as possible at every turn, who tend to see our Christian faith as the living out of recipes received from those who have gone before. Recipes that have worked well.

A negative -- to my mind -- example of this kind of Christian would be those who understand sin as, among other things, drinking or smoking or dancing -- and so they avoid those activities as a way to stay close to God. I can't much relate to that, old Disco King that I am. I realize that's a horrific image for some of you, but we all must confess our sins before God.

Although that baker approach to Christian life doesn't appeal to me in *all* ways, I have to admit that there's wisdom accumulated over the centuries about what keeps us close to God and what draws us away, and no doubt I can benefit by reading the recipes of others and following the ones that have worked well: praying daily, immersing myself in scripture in a way that is life-giving for me, talking with my fellow Christians as I discern the path of life that Jesus is calling me to follow.

Then there are those whose life in Christ is more like the kind of cooking *I* enjoy, the kind that comes most naturally and easily to me. I think of those in the Jesuit tradition, as they review their lives each day, examining them to see where they have been close to God and where not, asking what in their lives keeps them close to God and what does not?

Working out the recipe they have received as they go along. What tastes the way it should, which might be the way I've put things together or it might be the way that God wants me to put it together. Hopefully most often God and I like the flavor the same way.

I have to admit that on occasion when I make my recipes in a pot, they don't taste very good to my family, and if I'm willing to admit it, they usually don't taste very good to me on those occasions either.

Listening to the rest of the family of God as we go along in this life, as we formulate our lives, is an important part of our journey: the family with us *and* the family before us. Sometimes our family can be honest with us in a way that we cannot be with ourselves.

I suppose life is richest, whether in cooking or in faith, when there's some combination of the two approaches, the two ways of putting things together. Sometimes we need to follow those recipes that have worked over the generations, which means that we need to know what they are. At other times, we need to be innovative and creative about putting recipes together, so that they serve both ourselves and others – including God -- in a fashion with which we all can live peacefully.

Each time we're confronted with a situation like the shooting this week in Omaha, my initial reaction is that I want to lock up every gun in the nation. And I DO think that as a society we're way too relaxed and easygoing about guns. But the extreme response is rarely the best, as hard as it is for a part of me to accept that in this case.

But neither is it helpful to hang on to recipes for life when we know that they lead again and again to distasteful, even horrific, situations. At some point, we need to commit ourselves to altering the recipe so that the outcome can likewise be altered.

Advent is a time of repentance. A time of turning. That's true about all of us individually, and it's true about us as faith communities. It's also true about our society. What changes are you being invited into in your recipe for life this year? And what changes is God inviting our world into, so that when God comes in Jesus Christ, we can sing glory to Him in the highest, not with heavy hearts, but with light and joyous ones?

In the proper preface we say for Advent, we proclaim that, when Christ comes, "we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing." *That* is the end of the recipe for the world which God has created: that we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold the appearing of Christ.

Where in our individual and corporate lives are we headed for that outcome? And where are we instead burning to a crisp that which we are putting together with the ingredients God so graciously gives us to make our daily bread?