

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: December 4, 2011

Sermon Title: The Readiness Checklist

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

I am in trouble. People, seriously, I am in big trouble. It's this Christmas concept. I did Thanksgiving really well, I think – all the food came out to the table at the same time, nothing was burnt. I had little namecards at people's places that I'd printed off the computer, and there was a centerpiece – okay, it was the same bobblehead turkey that I've used every year, but still, it was there. There were clean sheets on all the beds for guests. I got most of the dog hair vacuumed up, at least those places where you would see it, and I sprayed the dog himself with Febreze, which helped. Everyone seemed happy and well-fed, perhaps *overfed* – we actually served alka-seltzer with the pie course, just to save a step. You think I'm kidding, but I'm not – we really did. So, all in all, I'm saying, Thanksgiving went really well, in fact, considering we're talking about me, the word might be *uncharacteristically* well.

But now I'm in trouble. The reason Thanksgiving went well is because a week ahead of time, I found – online - a Thanksgiving Readiness Plan, which made all the difference. Three days before, it said, check to make sure you have appropriate serving utensils. Check your Tupperware supply so you are ready for leftovers. It even had a recipe for making your mashed potatoes three days ahead. I know aged potatoes sounds bad, but really, they were great. So, yesterday, eager to produce a Christmas worthy of the bar I raised at Thanksgiving, I went looking online for a similar Christmas Readiness Plan. I found it. And people, I'm in trouble. I'm out of the game before I even got *in* the game. Listen to this. (*reading from the list*) "By the end of November: You must have your gifts to faraway relatives in the mail. Have your Christmas shopping finished and ready for wrapping. Have your outside decorations up. Basic Christmas plans must be in place. Cards to be sent first week of December."

I actually started to hyperventilate reading this. You know those really bad nightmares where you dream you're back in college, and it's the final week of the semester and somehow you find out you were enrolled in Physics all along and you didn't know it and the exam is tomorrow? That's how I felt. Because let me tell you, folks, how much of the above-mentioned checklist I have completed. None. Zero. Nothing. Zip.

Well, that's not totally true. We *did* hang a wreath on the Parsonage. Earlier this week, I was at Home Depot, and saw that they had a six-foot wide wreath, and I bought it and shoved it in the minivan and brought it home. I thought we could hang it off the front of the house somehow. That didn't turn out to be that easy. It involved Andres and me up in the attic hauling on a rope, pulling the wreath up from the ground, while David called out "A little higher, I think, just a little higher!" and I hollered "you have no idea how much pain I am in right now!" You can check it out later, it looks kind of goofy.

So, other than that, I have accomplished *no* part of the Christmas Readiness checklist. I am in big trouble. I remember my brother telling me about this big dinner party that he and his wife gave. She's a scientist at MIT, he's in math at Harvard, they're pretty high-functioning folks. They had planned out their Saturday with no margin for error: they both had to be at work, but they'd be home 90 minutes before guests were due, and those 90 minutes were scheduled to the millisecond. Vacuum this room, peel this vegetable, check for TP in that bathroom, and even time for showers. And when the guests came through the door at 7, all would be perfect. And indeed it might have been, except -- the guests came through the door at 6, cause that's what their invitations had said.

So that's what I was feeling yesterday. Like my brother felt as the guests came through the door an hour early -- unprepared, unready, hopelessly behind. Like the physics exam was tomorrow and I hadn't finished class. And therefore in the midst of this panicked state yesterday, I decided to take a deep breath, some Zen breathing, and just reflect, meditate calmly on the scripture for today. I went with kind of a traditionalist approach to choosing the scripture today, there are prescribed readings for each Sunday, the Lectionary, it's called, which most churches follow -- we usually do our own thing, but today I gave Emory the lectionary reading.

And today -- like every second Sunday in Advent -- is John the Baptist day. Jesus' cousin, that is, who prepared the way for his Messiah relative by going out preaching to people that they had to get ready. It seemed fitting, since I was freaking out about not *being* ready, it seemed fitting that I should spend some time with John the Baptist, whose job was to *get* people ready. And here's how he suggested people get ready for the arrival of the Messiah. Repent, he said, Confess your sins, and acknowledge that you are in big, big trouble. Great, I thought, I've got a theme going here. I'm in big trouble according to the Christmas Readiness Checklist. *And* I'm in big trouble according to John the Baptist. I need to wrap *and* repent.

Which, in all honesty, was the original concept behind Advent. Repentance, that is. Advent was designed to be pretty much a mini Lent, a time for sober soulful reflection on our shortcomings -- And actually that's still what the official word is from the Church, capital C -- this is to be, it says, a penitential and solemn time in the churches. No Christmas carols. Not yet. Take John the Baptist, seriously, people -- this is the time for repentance. Well,

I'm not going to suggest make you get down on your knees right now. But I do think there's something in today's scripture that invites our reflection. I think what John the Baptist was really saying was: *people*, something amazing is coming. And whatever you've got to do to get your hearts ready for that, well, you need to do it. Someone is coming who will show you what love really is. Someone is coming who can take whatever wrong you've lived and undo it. Someone who can take whatever misstep you've made and straighten it out. And if you want to be ready to hear the incredible Good News about to arrive in this world, it helps just to remind yourself of how much you could *use* some Good News. Just open your hearts, he was saying. Just get your hearts open so that love can come in.

That's what Advent is. *Real* Advent. Just getting our hearts ready. Just getting ourselves ready to welcome in the living presence of God, whose birthday it's about to be. The truth is, I *can't* be ready for Christmas according to the preparation checklist. I give up on that. But I think I can get myself ready to welcome in the living presence of God. So can you.

Yesterday here in the church we celebrated the life of a woman I loved dearly, Jeanne Leebaert. Jeanne was 90ish but those who gathered here to mourn her yesterday included kids from this church and from our SPF youth group, who had loved and been loved by her. There were people of all ages, all backgrounds, because Jeanne had the extraordinary capacity to welcome everyone into her heart. She had, I said, an open-door policy of the heart no peephole to peer through first, no deadbolt to draw back – the door to her heart was always open, and we were all welcomed in. And who she most readily had welcomed in, all her life, was Jesus, whom she knew as a loving companion and dear friend. I suspect that's what made it so darn easy to welcome the rest of us in.

That's all that John the Baptist was saying to people – get yourselves ready to open your heart to love like you've never known before. Whatever you have to do to be ready to receive him whole heartedly, that's what you need to do.

And that, really, is Advent. Christmas craziness is Christmas craziness, and some of us are going to get it together in time, and some of us just aren't. But *Advent* is something for all of us – it doesn't take time or a list or a budget or a spreadsheet of gift selections – also suggested on the Christmas Readiness plan – it just takes an open heart a willingness to recognize our need for love and forgiveness and hope and a readiness to let the Christ Child of Bethlehem in, to let Jesus in. That's what Advent is.

So, wish me luck on coming up with Christmas Dinner, and I wish you luck on your gift list – but let's commit, you and I, to making sure that what really matters gets done: making ready our hearts, opening the doors to our very selves, and welcoming in the gift of Love that is headed our way. In his name - *Amen*.