

So, how many of you went shopping on Friday? In recent years they have taken to calling it “black Friday.” I was never really clear if that was because our shopping puts all these merchants’ books in the black OR because so many folk put themselves into a black hole of debt? Black Friday is the biggest and most hyped day of the Christmas shopping season. Even though 56% of Americans don’t go shopping that day there are still a lot of people out there preparing for Christmas.

This is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is our season of preparation. Only, unlike the shopping sprees we go on, or the other parts of Christmas preparation, like cards and parties and gift wrap, we are not preparing for just one day, or even a week. Advent is the season of preparation for the rest of our lives.

All the things that will keep us so busy during December are OK as long as we realize that Christmas is not just about a baby born long ago, it is about the Eternal Word of God, present for all time, present before there was time, taking on our human nature defeating the stranglehold that evil has upon us. That is the theme of Advent but unfortunately that doesn’t so easily lend itself to a Hallmark Card.

Actually the gospel reading does not say that the people prior to the flood were evil. It just says that they were unconcerned – distracted. This is the attitude of so many that we rub shoulders with every day. Most people don’t try to be evil. They just are unconcerned about having a place for God in their lives. We also get so busy doing things that we just don’t take time for the only thing, the only Person who matters. We don’t make time for daily prayer because we are too busy. We attend Mass when it is convenient, but seldom change our schedules so we can go to Church. For lots of people Christmas is just an excuse for a shopping spree.

In addition to the tradition of Black Friday, there is a deeply traditional pilgrimage almost all Americans feel pulled to make at least once in their lives – the trip to Disney World.

Disney's role in America's modern mythology is absolutely critical, even central. Increasingly the world sees Disney as the real symbol of America. Forget the Statue of Liberty, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights - America means Mickey Mouse. The recreational mecca called Disney World has now surpassed America's historical mecca called Washington, D.C., as the nation's most popular tourist site. Some now argue that Disneyland/World is the spirit of America, the nation's key sacred space, the bearer of the images that carry American meaning and mission.

Disney's mission statement is simple and straightforward: **"Provide People Happiness."** In its quest to meet this goal, Disney focuses all its energies in the realm of fantasy - convincing the whole country that to find happiness involves escaping reality. When you visit Disney World, its central image is the Castle of Sleeping Beauty. Its graceful, soaring storybook towers and turrets preside over the rest of the theme park below. Yet except for a few novelty shops along the walkway that cuts through it, this beautiful symbol of Disney's fantasy world come to life is empty – a hollow shell.

But its very emptiness is full of meaning. For that is precisely the function of Disney World - to empty us of the harsh realities of life and render us unconscious to those things which are too hard to bear. That is part of the experience of Disney - to become "unconscious" of the real world and to enter a never-never land of fantasy and fakery. Fittingly Sleeping Beauty's Castle - a monument to a trance-like sleep - serves as the portal to this world. If Disney entices participants to fall asleep in order to escape life, the church's mission is to urge people to wake up - in order to experience an authentic and full existence.

Several decades ago the city of Pittsburgh had many steel mills which hammered day and night. The people near them got so used to the constant pounding that they slept through it. In fact, it lulled them to sleep. But one night an accident shut down a major mill. The pounding noise stopped. Everyone woke up.

For most Americans December is the busiest month of the year. Surrounded as we are by deadening noise and distractions, there is only one thing which can pull us back to life - the same thing which woke up the people of Pittsburgh: silence. Genuine silence can profoundly turn one's life around. We all know the Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd" – here is a version revised for Advent:

- The lord is my pace setter . . . I shall not rush
- He makes me stop for quiet intervals
- He provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity
- He leads me in the way of efficiency through calmness of mind and his guidance is peace
- Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for his presence is here
- His timelessness, his all importance will keep me in balance
- He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with his oils of tranquility
- My cup of joyous energy overflows
- Truly harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours for I shall walk in the Pace of my Lord and dwell in his house for ever.

The message of Advent is that each moment has eternal significance, that the God of all things past and things future, is also the God of the here and now. God invites us to live in the present in expectation and awareness of the fact that eternal realities can and do break in at any moment.