

All the traditional signs of Christmas are upon us: Leftover turkey, the Plaza lights, the Mayor's Christmas tree, receipts and a few bruises from the first shopping day, traffic death counts, the Salvation Army dressed in red and priests dressed in purple.

You've probably been making a list of what to do to get ready for Christmas. Get the Christmas cards, draw up the shopping list, haul out the decorations, stock up the cupboard for guests. And we've probably added another item to our list of things to get ready: Us. Those of us who give of our time and devotion to worship God weekly at St. Regis, we'd like to get ourselves ready for Christmas, too.

Getting ourselves ready is not as easy as getting other preparations ready. And if you were out trying to shop at Bannister Mall on Friday, you know how difficult those other preparations can be, too. The real difference is this: Whatever the other preparations are, come December 25 they're over. You have accomplished them. It's just not so easy to tell by then if we're spiritually better than we were at the beginning of Advent.

Maybe we wanted to prepare well so we could celebrate Christmas Day well. But celebrating Christmas Day well just isn't enough.

The Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent can help us refocus our attention. The Gospel tells us that our spiritual Advent preparation is for the coming of Christ, not for the coming of Christmas. Christ will come when we least expect him. Christmas comes when we most expect it. To prepare for Christmas is a little easier because it's arrival is so predictable. To prepare for Christ is something else altogether because we don't know when he's coming.

The time of preparation for Christ is like the time of preparation for the flood, Jesus says. You remember Noah and the flood. Only a few people were saved because everyone else was out, Jesus says, eating, drinking, and getting married. Now he doesn't mean that those who eat, drink, and get married can't be saved. Even Noah ate, drank, and got married. In fact there's one scene where he drank a little too much. The great sin, according to Jesus, is that in Noah's time, people were unconcerned. Nobody cared and the flood caught them all off guard.

My brothers and sisters, to prepare ourselves spiritually this Advent what we need is to be concerned. What we need is to develop this thing we call the "Christmas Spirit"--a willingness to give not just to the people on our Christmas list but to those who are needy; a willingness to voice our concern for real progress for peace in a week when our country has broken the limitations of SALT II; a willingness to stop whatever sin keeps us from loving our families and loving our Church.

The Son of Man will come when we least expect him. We must be on guard lest he return and find us with too many clothes in the closet, too many toys on the shelf, too many appointments on the calendar, too little concern for our neighbor. This year, don't prepare yourselves for Christmas. Prepare yourselves for Christ.