

# Holiday Survival Guide

## Practical Tips on the First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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On the First Sunday of Advent each year, the assigned lectionary Gospel reading, like the one we have just heard from the Gospel of Mark, focuses on theme of being alert, awake and watchful for the time when God's kingdom will be fully ushered in – as in the “End Times,” or the “Second Coming.” (The word Advent, by the way, means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival.’) It's in following weeks that the lectionary begins to focus on the ushering in of God's kingdom as revealed in the birth of Jesus, the “First Coming,” so to speak.

Last year, I preached directly on the lectionary text and focused my sermon on the theme of the Second Coming of Christ and what that might mean to progressive Christians. But right, wrong, or indifferent, I decided this earlier this week that I just didn't want to address all that again this year. Instead, I want to focus on a theme that I shared in my First Sunday of Advent sermon three years ago – How to Survive the Holidays.

You know that I am one to usually concentrate my sermons around scripture. But I decided that this year I would once approach this season of Advent more from a psychological health perspective than a theological one. Yet after all, preparing for and surviving the holiday season has theological implications in and of itself. And for those of you who were here last Sunday when I shared my recent spiritual experience at Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico, I think that you will find an actual touch of monasticism in approaching the holiday season in a way that leads to greater simplicity and wholeness for you and all involved.

We all know what lies ahead: a constant bombardment of activities like decorating, parties, shopping, entertaining, religious observances, and family get-togethers. And just like last year, and the year before that, most of us will share a particularly common experience – “**Holiday Stress.**”

If you get onto the Internet and do a Google search on, “holiday survival tips” you'll get about 3 ½ million websites to look at for advice. When I did that a few days ago I found tips on how to survive things like holiday shopping, holiday travel, holiday eating and partying, holiday fitness and exercise, surviving the holidays financially, relationship survival, even holiday survival tips for those who are grieving or are chronically ill. If you need it there's even a website that addresses tips for facing infertility during the holidays.

The websites I was particularly drawn to however, as a pastor, are those that focused on dealing with surviving holiday stress. I will share an expanded list of some of those tips toward the close of this sermon. But first, I want to return to the particular list that I shared with you a few years ago.

In an article written by David A. Jones, Ph.D., a psychologist in Austin, Texas who specializes in working with individuals and couples, he lists four simple, but remarkably helpful suggestions that can aid us in preparing for Christmas. And though none of them specifically mentions Jesus or God, they can reflect, in my opinion, the presence of God working in and through our lives. If followed, they can perhaps help us to remain focused on the true meaning of this season. Those 4 tips are:

1. **Do less**
2. **Breathe more**
3. **Adjust your expectations**
4. **Focus on people, not stuff**

As most of you are aware, for the first time in my life I hosted my extended family at my home this past week for Thanksgiving. Everything went absolutely wonderfully (thanks in part to Whole Foods), and I can personally testify that keeping these 4 tips in the forefront of my own thoughts helped contribute to making our time together even more meaningful. A few words, now, on each of these.

### 1. **Do less**

During the holidays, when it comes to time, money, and social and family commitments, most of us simply try to do too much. We over-do, over-buy, over-bake, over-eat, over-greet, and over-indulge ourselves into oblivion. We all seemingly forget how to say “no.” We forget that wonderful Presbyterian mantra, “All things in moderation.” Or to reference one of my favorites: Find and keep a healthy balance in all aspects of life.

So I encourage you to try something different this year. When deciding how to spend your limited time and energy, choose quality over quantity. And when it comes to events that are over your pre-determined limits, give yourself permission to say, “thank you for thinking of me, but I (or we) just can't make it this time.”

### 2. **Breathe more**

For years now when I see someone getting really stressed out I have simply suggested to them to breathe. Picking up on this, many of my friends have passed on that same bit of advice when they see me getting stressed.

You know what, it really works – and primarily from a physiological standpoint. Whenever we get stressed our breathing becomes more shallow and rapid, which in turn causes our heart rate and blood pressure to increase. We tend to panic and become more aggressive. Therefore, we are more likely to lose our temper more quickly. And sadly, we render ourselves relatively incapable of experiencing pleasure and joy.

So when you find yourself getting stressed out this month, stop whatever you're doing and simply take several slow, deep breaths. And as you're breathing, you may want to pause for a moment to pray for a sense of peace and calm – it can also do wonders.

### 3. **Adjust your expectations**

When it comes to imagining how we want our holidays to be, adults tend to do one of two things – we either over-idealize the holidays of our childhood, which are

impossible to recreate, or we resolve to have the “perfect holiday” that we never experienced in childhood. Either way, we're in for disappointment by setting up the unrealistic expectation of complete happiness and fulfillment.

As we all know, however, real-life holidays just don't work like they did on the Little House on the Prairie, or in Norman Rockwell paintings. So instead of expecting a “perfect holiday,” try to be open to some wonderful *moments*, especially when you least expect them. And make sure to create some open time and space with those you love in which those moments can happen.

#### **4. Focus on people, not on stuff**

If we're not careful, it is very easy to buy into the consumeristic myth that gifts, wrapping paper, and more twinkling lights are what really make the holidays special. In fact, retailers spend millions of dollars in holiday advertising each year to convince us of just that.

But the reality is that it's *who* we're with during the holidays (either in body or spirit) that make them so memorable. Think back to even the past Christmas or two. Can you really remember exactly what each and every person gave you as a gift? Or, do you remember that it was the time spent with those persons that made it special? Perhaps good memories have also stemmed from time spent with those in need, like volunteering to bring joy the poor or the lonely.

So this year, instead of looking primarily at *what* you get for Christmas (or at what you didn't get) try looking at how you and your life has been blessed, and be grateful. Carry this season of Thanksgiving into the season of Advent. Put the emphasis and focus on your relationships!

So as we prepare our hearts and minds for Christmas this year, individually and as a congregation, I encourage you, I implore you, to:

**Do less; Breathe more; Adjust your expectations; Focus on people, not stuff**

And remember to:

- do all things in moderation
- keep balance in your life
- communicate
- be honest with your feelings
- find ways to relax
- be flexible
- be less competitive
- keep your sense of humor
- remember that patience is a virtue
- let go of your need to control
- empathize with the feelings of others
- find some time for yourself
- whatever helps you feel more connected with the presence of God, do it;
- know that it is helpful to your spiritual and mental health to acknowledge any grief during this time – for it's only natural to grieve the loss of any kind: a loved one, health, job security, finances, and a whole host of other losses of the year and previous years.

If we can do even some of these things well, then we will be in a much better position to spiritually reflect upon that all-important question:

**What significance does the birth, life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, this ancient Jewish itinerate preacher and spiritual mystic, have for you and your life, and for our life together?**

Amen.