

# Surviving the Holiday Season

## Four Practical Tips on the First Sunday of Advent

*Mark 13:24-37 1 Corinthians 1:3-9*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

*Rev. Todd B. Freeman*  
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Today is the First Sunday of Advent, Christianity's month-long preparation for Christmas. To put it most simply, the Season of Advent is a time of active preparation and anticipation – a time for the church, you and I, to reflect upon what Christmas really means. So throughout the month of December, I'd like for you to ask yourself time and time again:

**What significance does the birth, life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth have for me and my life?**

I know that in this, or any congregation, there will be a variety of answers to that question. And that's okay. And this question is important not only as a matter of faith and spirituality, but also to help provide some much needed focus and diversion from the hectic busyness associated with the weeks leading up to Christmas. For 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."**

Therefore, instead of delving into a deep theological discussion this morning of the meaning of the Season of Advent and Christmas, I want to share with you a few practical tips to help make the Holidays a bit more pleasant and meaningful for all of us.

A few years ago I came across 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 mention Jesus, they can all reflect, in my opinion, the presence of God. If followed, they can help us to remain focused on the true meaning of this season. They are:

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

To help you remember these I have included them in the worship bulletin, as well as in the December newsletter that will be coming out later this week. 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.”

So 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 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. In fact, in a former church I served a woman even did a needlepoint for me that simply said “Breathe.”

You know what, it really works. Whenever we get stressed our breathing becomes more shallow and rapid, which in turn causes our heart rate and blood pressure to increase. We feel panicky and are likely to lose our temper more quickly. We tend to become more aggressive drivers and race through shopping malls with a scowl on our face. 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. Or, when someone you’re with exhibits these symptoms, look them compassionately in the eye (with the focus on being compassionate) and simply say, “breathe.” And as you’re breathing, pause for a moment of prayer for calmness – 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 set ourselves up for disappointment by setting unrealistic expectations 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 a few 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 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 it's also time spent with those in need, like 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 God has, and is blessed you and your life - and be grateful. **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, let us try to:

**do less;  
breathe more;  
adjust our expectations;  
and focus on people, not stuff.**

If we can do that, 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 have for you and your life, and for our life?**

Amen.