

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
18 December 2022

Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalm 24
Romans 1:1-7
(Matthew 1:23) Matthew 1:18-24

Getting Things Done

Advent is a holy season of hope, optimism, and new beginnings. It's also a season of preparation. That is: Preparing the way of the Lord.¹ But, as we often experience, there are many other things on the list to prepare for at this time of year: final exams, travel plans, finishing up things at the office, year-end reports, family gatherings, gifts, getting ready for Christmas celebration. Advent is a holy season, but we often experience it as a busy season, as well, with so much to *do*.

Perhaps some (or many) of us are feeling the stress that comes with having a long list of things to get done. This Mass, then, is a break from all of that. It's a moment of grace to take a break from *doing* and just enjoy *being*. After all, we're not human *doings*, are we? We're human *beings*! But, sometimes we get that backwards, and find our value and worth in what we *do* rather than in who we *are*. That is, beloved children of God.

This Mass, then, is a gift of peace. It's a time to simply *be* with one another as fellow disciples, giving praise and worship to God with our voices and our hearts. It's a time to *be* with God, who is Emmanuel—which means He is with us.² God is *always* with us. Yet, is the reverse true? Are we *always* with God?

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Last month, I was meeting with a friend, and we were talking about how things were going. I just made an offhand comment about having a lot of things on my list to do and struggling to keep things organized. Then he suggested that I read a book called *Getting Things*

Done. (Has anyone ever heard of or read this book? Has anyone tried its methods? Did it work?)

At first, I bristled a bit at his suggestion. My initial thoughts were, “Not another self-help book that promises to solve all my problems...” And, what about that title? *Getting Things Done*? I’m a human *being*, not a human *doing*! But, my friend said he had tried it many years ago, and it had really helped him do better at keeping things organized and, well, getting things done. He said to me enthusiastically, “It’s all about *GTD*—*Getting Things Done*!” So, I decided to give it a try.

I checked out the book from the library just a few days before the beginning of Advent. On the cover is the title—*Getting Things Done*—along with a golden check mark. The subtitle reads: “The Art of Stress-Free Productivity.” And there’s a nice picture of the author, David Allen, smiling and looking stress-free.

I started reading this book at the beginning of Advent, and it has unexpectedly become a source of spiritual reading for my Advent Season. *How so?* Well, I’m not going to go into the details of how the system works, but there are a few principles the system is based on, which I’ve noticed are also solid principles for the spiritual life. The premise is explained on the back cover:

“...our productivity is directly proportional to our ability to relax.”

And, if we are able to relax, then we’ll be able to:

- Reassess goals and stay focused in changing situations
- Plan and unstick projects
- Overcome feelings of confusion, anxiety, and being overwhelmed³

As I’ve been reading through the book, I’ve realized that, if you just change a few words, these are also solid principles for discernment in our spiritual life. Instead of thinking about

getting things done in business, we might change the word “productivity” to “doing God’s will”, and the premise becomes:

“...our *ability to do God’s will* is directly proportional to our ability to *receive His peace*.”

And, if we’re able to receive God’s peace—which comes through prayer, listening to God, getting better at recognizing His voice (*How do we do that on a daily basis? Not GTD, but remember: TPG!*⁴)—if we’re able to receive more of God’s peace, then we’ll be able to:

- Reassess goals and stay focused *on doing God’s will* in changing situations
- Unstick *sticky situations that come up in life*
- Overcome feelings of confusion, anxiety, and being overwhelmed

Getting Things Done claims that only “when our minds are clear and our thoughts are organized can we achieve effective results and unleash our creative potential.” In this Advent Season, we could modify that to say: only “when our minds *and hearts have prepared the way of the Lord and our focus is on doing God’s will* can we achieve effective results *that bear good fruit* and unleash our *missionary* potential as disciples.”

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Right about now you might be wondering what this has to do with today’s Gospel. Or, if I’m about to try to sell you my own book called *Getting Spiritual Things Done*. I assure you there’s no book in the works (although someone after last night’s Mass suggested it). And, it’s still TBD if *GTD* will help me become a more effective administrator (though I appreciate your prayers for this!). But I do want to bring us back to God’s Word for us today.

The First Reading and the Gospel are both related to the *Emmanuel Prophecy*. The First Reading from Isaiah is the revelation of that prophecy. The Gospel of Matthew is the fulfillment of that prophecy. But there’s a significant contrast between the two people we hear about in these two Readings.

On the one hand, in the First Reading, King Ahaz hears the prophecy, but is closed off to having faith in God. Instead, he puts up a false piety as a front: “I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!”⁵ *What’s going on here?* Ahaz is King of Judah (the southern kingdom which contains Jerusalem, but has split off from the northern kingdom of Israel). It’s the 8th century B.C., during the Syro-Ephraimite War, and the kings of Israel and Syria are attacking Jerusalem. King Ahaz is being encouraged to trust that God is with them in this sticky situation.

However, by saying he will not ask for a sign from God, Ahaz is saying that he “prefers to depend upon the might of [alliances with other armies and kingdoms] rather than the might of God.”⁶ He is closed off to hearing God’s word that he need not fear the invading armies, and therefore is experiencing confusion, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. Rather than turning to God to discern what to do next, he prefers to rely upon himself and other human powers for guidance.

On the other hand, the Gospel presents Joseph to us. He’s also in a sticky situation. His betrothed is with child, and he doesn’t understand how. He makes what seems to be a reasonable and even charitable decision “to divorce her quietly,” so as to not “expose her to shame.”⁷ Yet, what makes all the difference is what comes next. After making a decision about what he will *do*, he remains open to the Lord. He remains open to hearing what the Lord has to tell him about the situation. Because he listens to the Lord and is open to receiving His peace, Joseph is able to:

- Reassess goals and stay focused *on doing God’s will* in changing situations
- Unstick *sticky situations that come up in life*
- Overcome feelings of confusion, anxiety, and being overwhelmed

Joseph didn’t know everything that God was doing in that moment. Joseph didn’t know exactly how things were going to work out. But, he had faith in God, and it allowed him to clear

out the obstacles in his mind and heart, prepare the way of the Lord to speak to him, and then simply do the next right thing.

As I've been reading through *Getting Things Done*, I've recognized that its methods are based on this very thing: clearing out obstacles in order to help the successful businessperson simply do the next right thing. This is a powerful spiritual principle for us as disciples. There are many obstacles we face as we discern what to do each day. We might not see how a sticky situation will be resolved. And then we can be tempted to focus on the feelings of confusion, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. And that can prevent us from seeing clearly, having faith in God, and simply doing the next right thing.

This is the Advent lesson that Joseph's example teaches us today. Joseph was in a sticky situation. Initially, he really didn't know what to *do*. So, he put things back in order. He first allowed himself to *be*. And, through *being* with God, he was open to receiving God's peace and hearing from God. Joseph didn't know how everything would work out. But he received from God the next right thing to do. And it made all the difference.

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I was speaking with another friend this week about how his Advent has been going. He shared with me that he'd been drifting from God for the past couple years. And, that this Advent, he'd been making his way back to God. And, that he's been doing so, as he said it, "by focusing on the next right thing." When he said that, I said to him, "That's Joseph! That's our Gospel this coming Sunday." And, for my friend specifically, the next right thing to do for him was making a good Confession. He had been avoiding it for over two years, and he knew that a good Confession was the next right thing for him. Then he would see what came next after that.

What's the next right thing for you during this last week of the holy Season of Advent? We have Confessions offered Friday morning, Friday evening, and Saturday morning. There are a few more Penance Services in the Deanery, as well as other Confession times at neighboring parishes. Maybe clearing out some obstacles in your mind and heart is the next right thing for you, to help you prepare the way of the Lord, receive His peace, and see things more clearly. Advent is a season of optimism, hope, and new beginnings. A season of allowing the Lord to make all things new.

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When Joseph did the next right thing—saying “yes” to being the earthly father of our Savior—not much changed in the world at that moment. Very few people knew about it. It was “business as usual” in Israel at that time.⁸ Yet, through doing the next right thing...and then the next right thing...and then the next right thing... One decision at a time... One right thing at a time... Joseph fulfilled his vocation and calling from God, and contributed to world never being the same.

Yes, we do need to get things done in this world. No, there's not really such a thing as “self-help”, because God is with us and helps us in all things. Our value and worth are found in who we *are* as beloved children of God—not in what we *do*. And, in order to “get things done” that truly matter for ourselves, for the world, and to God, Joseph teaches us that we must *first* be with God. Then do the next right thing.

¹ See Matthew 3:3

² See Isaiah 10:14 and Matthew 1:23

³ David Allen, *Getting Things Done*, back cover

⁴ TPG comes from homilies in Summer 2021, when we reflected on the importance of having a retreat experience each day that involves three aspects:

- Time: intentionally setting aside time (twenty minutes a day)
- Place: in a place set apart from the distractions of ordinary life (prayer space at home, outdoors, church)
- God: in order to reprioritize one's relationship with God

⁵ Isaiah 7:12

⁶ See footnote at bible.usccb.org/bible/Isaiah/7?12

⁷ Matthew 1:19

⁸ Adrien Nocent, OSB, “8. Fourth Week of Advent: The Annunciation of the Messiah’s Coming” in *The Liturgical Year, Volume One: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, tr. by Matthew J. O’Connell, (127-128):

“All this the angel announces, and Joseph’s response is an act of faith.

The story may strike us as unsophisticated. As a matter of fact, nothing changed as a result in the life of the times; life went on as it always had, the sun shone as before, people worked or played, did good or evil—nothing changed. Nor was there apparently any change in the outward lives of Joseph and Mary. This fact should put us on guard against thinking of the events of salvation as theatrical in character. They are not. They respect and do not disturb the course of events, and for that very reason we sometimes minimize their importance. Here we are, for example, at the very turning point of world history, for history will be changed and take on an entirely new meaning. Yet nothing of this appears on the surface. Joseph goes on as before while he waits; he is caught up in the drama, but he is at peace ever since he accepted God’s will in faith.”