

***Every Christmas I feel drained and am relieved when Dec. 26 finally comes around. What can I do to really celebrate the season of Christmas?***

That's a good question. I think that some people might read it and be slightly puzzled. "What's the big deal?" they might ask. "Aren't there more important things?"

Others might really like the fact that Menard's has had its Christmas displays up since the middle of October (no kidding!). Still others might never have stopped to question the way in which we celebrate Christmas in this country: 24-hour-a-day Christmas songs beginning on Thanksgiving Day just seems to make sense to them.

I can understand this. In fact, I have to make something of a confession here. I feel a bit like an old codger who thinks that "kids these days" shouldn't have a three-month summer break. Now that I don't have to go to school, I see the benefits of changing the academic calendar, but I remember the terror and indignation I felt as a student when I first heard this idea. In a similar way, my suggestion that we may need to re-think how we prepare for and celebrate Christmas might come across as a bit "Grinch-y."

But you will hear no humbugs out of me. I am all about the celebration. In fact, the Church gives us the season of Christmas (not just one day) to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we have "celebration" and we have "preparation."

How can you celebrate Christmas? By preparing during Advent. The season of Advent is roughly the four weeks preceding the season of Christmas. I'm sure you knew this. I'm sure that you also know that "advent" means "coming" or "arrival." It is the season when we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus has already come. What "arrival" are we preparing ourselves for? Well, for one, we are preparing ourselves to commemorate (and celebrate) his first coming 2,000 years ago. That is what most of us think of when we enter into Advent.

But possibly more importantly, we are preparing ourselves for his second coming. We are preparing ourselves to meet him.

"Wait! That's the purpose of Advent? I thought that it was just about getting ready for Christmas!" you might say. Well, yes. But that's not all. It isn't necessarily even the most important thing. "Prepare to meet your Maker," as the Old West saying goes. That is the purpose of Advent.

Advent is a penitential season (like Lent). Not many people experience Advent

this way. It is more often than not a season of indulgence. And why not? This is the one time of the year when we get certain foods and certain drinks. This is the one time of the year when we still get together and celebrate.

Now, there may be room for some of those things, but if that is all Advent has become in my life, then I am missing the point entirely.

The Scripture readings that the Church gives us during this season highlight this. There is an interesting amount of talk about the “desert” (that’s with one “s,” remember). The desert was where people went in order to create space in their lives for God to speak. This was where people went to die to themselves and their sins. I suggest we all go to the desert this Advent.

This is tough, especially because of all of the parties and treats that are specific to this time. I’m not saying that we need to fast from everything that we enjoy (that is a distinctly non- Catholic way of looking at life), but is there a way to “make room”? Find space in your life to say “no” to yourself. Not to everything, of course. But it is always a good idea to find at least one thing each day that you can exercise discipline over. (This discipline is ordered toward freedom.)

Find space in your house for God to be heard. You might sing carols or listen to your favorite Christmas CD while driving or getting supper ready, but is there also enough silence in your life for God to speak?

If Advent is about preparing myself (and my family) to meet Jesus, what are some things we could build into this season?

Well, what does your family need? Have you missed family dinners because things have just become too hectic? Make a point during Advent of fighting for time together. Have we not prayed together as a family? You could find an Advent family devotional online or at your local Catholic book store. Are there sins in your life that God is asking you to let him take? Bring your family to confession. Let your kids see that even their mom and dad know that they need Jesus.

There are Advent wreaths, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and even the occasional Claymation Christmas special, so many things that an individual or a family could do. But keep in mind the purpose of this season: to enter into the desert with God’s grace so that he can make you into the kind of person who is ready to meet him, the kind of person who can truly celebrate Christmas.