

Message: “Prepare with Joy”

Ray was struggling. Nothing he did seemed able to lift him out of his depression. Ray lived on a farm with Annie and their young daughter Karen. They’re surrounded by corn fields. Farming is a tough business. The margins are slim and you’re always dependent on things you can’t control, like weather, insects and plant diseases, which can affect the cash crops, your income and lifestyle. This was the life Ray and Annie had always known. They lived a quiet life, day in and day out.

The real pain in Ray’s life was his father, John. Ray had a falling out with his father several years earlier. Sadly, Ray’s father died before he could reconcile with him. This unresolved hurt is weighing down on Ray. It affects him, mentally and emotionally. There doesn’t seem to be an end to the pain and stress. Ray just wishes he had another chance.

This scenario is fictional. It’s from the 1989 movie “Field of Dreams” starring Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan, James Earl Jones, Ray Liotta and Burt Lancaster. The film serves as a storyline for our Advent series as it speaks to our common human nature and the challenges we face. If we all sat down and shared our stories, I’ll bet we’d find a lot of similarities to the scenario. Maybe we’ve never lived on a farm surrounded by cornfields, instead living in a big city surrounded by buildings and people. Both are fields. Both lifestyles, as well as others, can be stressful. Both are dependent on things you can’t control, like the economy, predators and diseases. Art reflects life in so many ways.

Most people are carrying the pain of unresolved hurt around. Many of us struggle with relationship issues. Maybe we didn’t get the chance to make amends for the hurtful things we said and did or to offer forgiveness for the hurtful things said and done to us.

Do you ever wish you had another chance? We all do at some point. I think most people wish for the opportunity to change things, to find a new way where their lives are less stressful and more fulfilling. We’re going to explore this path during the season of Advent. Advent literally means preparation. Before we can find a new path, we must prepare for the journey. Together, we’ll reflect on the first steps on the way.

To start we need a vision, so I’ll ask this question: what kind of second chance do you wish for? No matter what it is, I believe it revolves around something that brings you joy. Maybe it’s the joy you remember when your grandmother and grandfather made you feel special and loved. Maybe it’s the joy you remember when your Mom and Dad took you to a favorite place or made your favorite meal or helped you with your favorite activity. Let’s let our joy guide us.

What lifted you up and gave you joy before the troubles and darkness of life set in? You may want to think about it this week. For Ray and his father John, it was a love of baseball. Baseball has been called America’s favorite pastime. I remember playing as a boy, whether it was a pickup game in the yard, at the park with the neighbors or in organized games. It’s one way people, particularly men, find joy. Baseball comes with its own language of teams, players, statistics, streaks and, of course, the World Series. I know some of us enjoy watching the game. It brings us joy for a few moments.

But did you ever feel like an opportunity passed you by?

Ray’s Dad John did. He was a minor league baseball player who never made it to the majors. John looked up to the former Chicago White Sox player, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson. Ray shared his father’s love of baseball and respect for Joe Jackson, as many fathers and children do. And there lies the kernel of a dream.

As a little background, Shoeless Joe was a member of the “Black Sox,” eight members of the Chicago White Sox accused of throwing the 1919 World Series in exchange for money from a gambling syndicate. They were banned from professional baseball for life. There are rumors Shoeless Joe continued to play in amateur games for years afterward. He certainly was a man who wished for another chance.

One day, Ray is working in his cornfield when he hears a voice.

The voice whispers, “If you build it, he will come.” Ray then sees a vision of a baseball diamond in the cornfield and Shoeless Joe standing in the middle of the field. Ray believes he’s supposed to build a field so Shoeless Joe can come back to life. He’s convinced so Annie takes a chance and supports Ray’s crazy notion. She allows him to plow up their field which severely cuts into the family’s cash crop.

What vision do you have and what kind of risk are you willing to take to follow your dream? I’m not talking about the lottery. I’m asking whether you’re willing to do what it takes to follow a path to change your life. Most people take the easy way out. But seeking something you believe in and enjoy has the power to give you and your family powerful dreams and visions of a better future. To begin, listen for God’s voice which says, “He will come.”

So there’s a vision. Now the journey begins, a labor of joy.

As Ray builds the field, he tells his daughter Karen about Shoeless Joe and the infamous Black Sox Scandal. Ray explains there was always a question as to whether Joe was involved in throwing the World Series with his teammates since his offensive stats argue against it.

How many times are we involved in things we know aren’t above board? Whether we participate or not, our reputation and standing in the community can be negatively affected. Guilt by association is a real danger. We can find ourselves in too deep, needing another chance.

Building the field didn’t take very much time. We shouldn’t be surprised. After all, it really isn’t about the field. Buildings don’t define us, relationships do. We don’t live in isolation. We depend on our neighbors and they depend on us. Over the course of several months, nothing happened on the field. And Ray and Annie are subjected to town ridicule. It’s easy to imagine. After all, they dug up valuable crops for a ball field, including lights and stands, which no one uses. They aren’t very close to town. They’re second guessing themselves.

Then, one day, Shoeless Joe appears on the field. I’m not going to get into the details of how that happens. Joe asks if the field is heaven. It feels like it to him. This is his second chance. Then Joe asks whether he can bring others to play on the field. Before long, it’s filled and a game is being played. Ray, Annie, and Karen can see Joe and his fellow players, but Ray is surprised when Annie’s brother Mark can’t see any of the spirits. Mark doesn’t believe. He doesn’t get the vision or buy-in to their dream. Mark warns Annie and Ray they’re in danger of having their farm foreclosed, leaving them homeless. All journeys, physical and spiritual, come with risks to those who undertake them.

God’s Spirit is present in our lives today. If you are listening to me, in-person or online, you’re being touched by the Spirit. Our awareness and sensitivity to spiritual things is a big part of what draws us together. Those who are on this Advent journey share this awareness. We don’t need to see a spirit manifest on a ball field to know the Holy Spirit is present. Other people may not see or buy-in to our dream, but their lack of belief doesn’t define or minimize what we do.

Thank you for your patience with my retelling of the story. Our goal isn’t to explore the movie. I’m using it as a metaphor for the spiritual journey each of us make in our lives. We’ll keep checking in the Ray, Annie, Karen and the cast of characters each week, so we can follow their journey. I can tell you it’s worth the agony and ecstasy they encounter on the way, just as your spiritual journey is worth the highs and lows you experience.

For we are on a pilgrimage. It may not seem like it, but that’s what Advent is. We are on a pilgrimage to an encounter we can only dream about. We’re following God’s voice each step along the way, following the promise, “He will come.”

Why make the effort? After all, most of us are comfortable. We have a safe place to live, a lifestyle which suits us, friends and a comfortable place to come and worship God. This isn’t a bad thing. And I hope it’s a source of joy for all of us, in some way.

As the psalmist sang, *“When they said, ‘Let’s go to the house of God,’ my heart leaped for joy. And now we’re here ... all people ascend to worship and give thanks. This is what it means to be God’s people”* (Psalm 122:1-4, MSG, my paraphrase). Then we’re invited to join them, *“Pray for peace, prosperity and unity. For the sake of our family, friends and neighbors, live in peace. God, for the sake of your house and all gathered, I’ll do my best for you”* (vv6-9, *ibid*).

What a marvelous vision of our life as God’s children. Best of all, we don’t have to wait until we die to experience this life or to know joy. This vision of a better life can be ours. But we must prepare ourselves. We’ll be asked to go outside our comfort zone, to take risks, to live with conviction and believe, even when things seem impossible.

The answer to the question “why try?” is “because we choose love.”

Paul knew this to be true. Early in his life, he embraced an image of God that was all about rules, authority and punishment. His hands were covered in the blood of people who embraced Jesus’ way of grace and mercy. That is, until the day when, on a journey to Damascus, he encountered the living Christ and his life was changed for the better.

You hear it in his voice, *“Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can’t go wrong when you love others.”* Paul pushes us onto the path, *“make sure you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God”* (Romans 13:9b-10, 11 MSG). He’s telling us to stop coasting along as those who are spiritually asleep. It’s good to dream, but we must also act. Otherwise we will miss out. There’s good news: it’s not too late. Listen to God’s voice, take the chance and join us on the path with joy.

This is the path Zechariah and Elizabeth followed, Mary and Joseph followed and all who are part of God’s story do as well. It’s not always easy to see their joy. After all their lives were filled with dreams and visions as well. Their dreams may have been warnings, as God led them on the journey. Life wasn’t easy on the path, but deep down they knew and trusted God to care for them. And they knew joy in their lives together, in their children and in their relationships with family, friends and others on the journey with them.

This is the journey we’re on as well. Others aren’t just welcome; they’re encouraged to travel with us. Even though our spiritual journey won’t be easy, it will go beyond this lifetime. So it’s worth it. And we will find joy in our lives, families, friends and others we meet along the way. Even if we only feel it in the still, quiet place deep in our heart, joy is a deep sense our soul is well and in the hands of the Lord. Joy inspires us and reminds us: we are loved. Amen.

Next week, we’ll continue, looking for hope on our journey.

Psalm 122 (CEB)

I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let’s go to the Lord’s house!”
Now our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem!
Jerusalem is built like a city
joined together in unity.
That is where the tribes go up -
the Lord’s tribes!
It is the law for Israel
to give thanks there to the Lord’s name,
because the thrones of justice are there -
the thrones of the house of David!
Pray that Jerusalem has peace:
“Let those who love you have rest.
Let there be peace on your walls;
let there be rest on your fortifications.”
For the sake of my family and friends,
I say, “Peace be with you, Jerusalem.”
For the sake of the Lord our God’s house
I will pray for your good.

Romans 13:11-14 (CEB)

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let’s get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let’s behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.