Welcome to the church season of Advent. It is a very exciting time of year for us all. The happiness and anticipation really start with Thanksgiving and celebrating the holiday with the family. The kids get two days off school, and of course, there’s the countdown to Christmas. What kid wouldn’t like that?

And there is one more big tradition this time of year – visiting and entertaining with family and friends. We get to play the role of both guests and hosts in this special season.

 But as we know, things don’t always go so smoothly when you are the host, as in this story. A husband comes home and reminds his wife that that guests are coming for dinner that night, ‘What's for dinner?” he asks.

 The wife says, “I am not feeling well today, so there's only green beans.

 The husband says, “No worries; I have an idea. When the guests arrive, you'll welcome them and I'll go to the kitchen and drop a pan or something then you'll ask "What happened?". Then I'll say "Oh no!! I dropped the chicken". Then I’ll drop something again and say "I dropped the spaghetti. Now we only left with green beans." The guests were on their way, so the wife agreed that this was the only option.

 So the guests arrive and the wife greets them. After a few minutes, a loud sound comes from the kitchen.

 “Is everything alright, honey?” the wife asks.

 And the husband replies, “No, it’s not. I just dropped the green beans.”

In the Bible, hospitality is held up as a virtue – guests are to be treasured. We have to admit, though, that some of us are more comfortable in the role of gracious host than others. However, you can always grow better by “Improving Your Serve” as Christian author and pastor Chuck Swindoll would remind us with the title of one of his books. The theme of that book is Mark 10:45 – “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve; and to give himself as a ransom for many.”

Advent is about the coming of the Son of Man. When Jesus comes, he is both host and guest. But the question that previous generations of Christians have asked and which we continue to ask today is: When will Jesus come again? In seeking answers, we can only turn to Holy Scripture.

**Matthew 24:36-44 NIV**

**"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.**

Through biblical times up until the current era, there are many excellent examples of being the gracious host. One of the earliest is in Genesis, when Abraham and Sarah lavishly entertain the 3 men who turn out to be angels.

Then there are the Rules of Benedict from the Middle Ages, which included instructions on hospitality. “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt 25:35). Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share the faith (Gal 6:10 – “let us do good to all people”) and to pilgrims.

Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love. First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace, but prayer must always precede the kiss of peace because of the delusions of the devil (Rule of Benedict, Ch. 53).

Guests were to be offered meals and sleeping quarters with bedding. However, they were not to talk with or otherwise distract the monks who worked at the monastery (thecontemplativelife.org).

And for today’s thoughtful host, here are some items (nestingwithgrace.com) that would be sure to impress a special guest; things that modern guests want –books and blankets, water and snacks, pillows in different sizes and shapes, candles, flowers, plants, Wifi password, well-equipped bathroom with extra towels, and a toilet plunger (avoids embarrassment).

The special guest anticipated when Jesus walked the earth was, of course, the Messiah. You undoubtedly remember that the people at this time were looking for a great deliverer who could win military battles against the hated Romans. But that was missing the mark. That being said, what is it that we humans want, or should want, from our Savior? What are the characteristics of the Messiah’s rule? According to the prophet Jeremiah (Ch. 33), it is to be a reign of justice and fairness. All will feel safe and secure. And the name by which he will be called is “The Lord Our Righteous Savior”.

 And what are some of specific expectations of the Messiah that we have as Christians? We want authority, but we don’t want abuse of power. We want someone who knows us as a person, but is worthy of our praise. We want someone who is above human limitations, frailty, and corruption, but who understands human pain and suffering. In short, we want what we see in Jesus. But what about his promise to come again? We continue with the scripture.

**40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”**

 So we see from these words of Jesus that he is being true to the spirit of the OT prophets. But in this context, that is not very comforting. We’re reminded of the statement by the prophet Amos that “the Day of the Lord is dreadful” and “darkness, not light” (Amos 5:18). And Joel says, “Truly the day of the Lord is great; terrible indeed – who can endure it (Joel 2:11)? What do we have in the rest of the Bible that might give us some clarity?

 First we note that throughout the NT, in just about every tradition there, the Gospels, Paul, Peter, Revelation, we get statements about the time of Christ’s Second Coming – “like a thief in the night,” “only the Father knows the time,” and even a very straightforward quote from today’s passage, “the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” This is the most agreed-upon detail of the Second Coming – nobody knows when it will come except God the Father.

 And the point about all this is that the obsession we sometimes have in looking for “signs” seems to be in direct contradiction to this principle of not knowing when Jesus will come again. We want to see the signs and then say, “Aha, Jesus is coming now!” But in the scripture, the main point is not a matter of whether or not the signs will happen, but the state of preparation of the believers. Jesus’ intent seems to be not that we should constantly be worrying about seeing signs but that we be ready when we do see them. We should be preparing for our expected “unexpected” guest.

 The other thing we may note about the Second Coming is that people throughout the centuries have thought that it might be happening in their lifetimes. Martin Luther, during the days of the Reformation, saw such chaotic happenings going on that he thought those times might be when Jesus would come back. Also, about 170 years ago, a group called the Millerites proclaimed that Jesus was returning on a certain date. When it didn’t happen, they recalculated the date. After going through several cycles of this, the remaining members altered their theology a little bit and started a new denomination – the Seventh Day Adventists. And there have been many more folks throughout the centuries who have believed similarly (and wrongly). Again, none of this means Jesus couldn’t come back to earth tomorrow, but what good does it do for us to worry about it? The most important thing we can do is to expect our “unexpected” guest.

 However, there is a more fundamental issue here. When Jesus came to earth the first time, most people got it wrong. Only a few people realized who Jesus really was when he walked on earth. Sure, there were huge crowds when he was healing and teaching and feeding them, but where were those crowds when he hung on the Cross? In Acts 1:15 we’re told that the early church numbered about 120 persons. The Church exploded after Pentecost, when 5000 new believers were added – of course, this was after the Resurrection. The messianic prophecies that Jesus fulfilled were always there, but the people of Jesus’ time didn’t want to see them. They only saw the scriptures about the Messiah being a powerful military figure. They couldn’t imagine a Messiah who came into the world lying on a manger and who left it after dying on a cross.

 So we might well ask, “How we will know when Christ has come?” There may be nations fighting nations and a blood moon and earthquakes and all. But more important is what happens before this judgment day comes. Remember the question the sheep and the goats ask Jesus at the Day of Judgment (also in Ch. 25), “When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?” The answer, of course, is that whatever we have done for or failed to do for the “least of these”, we have done to Jesus.

 Our ancestors waited long for the Messiah’s first coming, being assured that it was almost time, but not yet. Today we still wait for the Second Coming, but we have the advantage of knowing that Christ has been here in human flesh once before. And we know that when he does come, we will know him. In the meantime, let’s make our Lord proud of us. After all, we shouldn’t really need to be motivated by fear; we should be motivated by Jesus’ love for us. So let us live in expectation of our “unexpected” guest. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.