

Welcome to the shortest 4th week of Advent possible. Someone suggested to me that the length of the homily should be proportionally short so I'll see what I can do. Now having the 4th week of Advent shortened to 24 hours does cause some inconveniences. We will be going to Mass either two days in a row or twice in the same day for some. It presents a challenge for those of us involved in decorating. As you can see, we had to get most of the Christmas colors up early because, well, we just don't have enough time tomorrow/this afternoon to get it done.

So, is there any advantage to having a shortened Advent season? I think so. The shortness makes it easier to contrast the before and after, and sometimes it's the contrast that catches our attention. It reminds me of the first pastor we had in our parish when I was growing up.

Forty-five years ago, I was an altar server in our parish. Our assignments rotated to all the different Mass times, a lot like today. Probably the least favorite Mass at which to serve was the 9:30. You see, that Mass was celebrated by the "good Monsignor". He had been a priest and pastor for 50 years and after he retired he continued to celebrate at the 9:30 Mass for another 20. I kid you not. If you served at his Mass, it was like going back in time. You really had to be on the ball and that included lighting about every candle in the place, which I think was

somewhere 30. But the most uncomfortable part of being at his Mass was his homily. You see the good monsignor's homilies were a combination of spit and vinegar and fire and brimstone. I seem to recall the word hell being thrown around liberally and with emphasis. The remarkable thing however, is that the monsignor was totally different in person. When he would visit with us kids at school, and he often came to chat with us on the playground, he was the most gentle, timid man... and generous too. After he walked around and chatted with us, especially at outdoor recess in the winter, we would always find some loose change and candy in our coat pockets. Not sure how it got there. And I found out that he was the same way in the confessional. He was kind, compassionate, and merciful.

I think he was a good model for the Church: a bit stern about warning us of the dangerous consequences sin, both eternal and temporal. And yet, when we do fall to our temptations, and then come to our senses, when we come to approach Christ and ask for forgiveness, for reconciliation, we find compassion and mercy waiting for us.

That same contrast is visible, if we think back to the scriptures readings just before Advent. What was the theme? We better be prepared for the Lord's coming or judgement will be upon us. Better make sure we are a sheep and not a goat or

there will ba-a-a-d consequences. Then we switched gears in Advent and started reliving the anticipation the Jewish people had for their Messiah who is then revealed to us by John the Baptist as Jesus. And finally, we switch back to the moment Mary first heard she would be the Mother of God. And what did the angel say to her in the reading today? *“Do not be afraid.”*

In these past few weeks we have gone from being afraid of not being ready for the Lord’s second coming, to being hopeful for his coming, to being invited to relive his first arrival. Four weeks ago, we were, perhaps, a little afraid of the talk of fire and brimstone, and yet 24 hours from now we will encounter our God as He comes to us: meek, holy, and mild. Think of that at whichever Christmas Mass you attend. Our God takes a form so helpless that we will want to encounter him, to pick Him up and hold Him, to see his mildness and his mercy. The Angel Gabriel told Mary in the Gospel today not to be afraid. In tomorrow night’s gospel, the angels will tell the shepherds, the first visitors, the same thing. Do not be afraid. Let’s make our final preparation then for His coming; not in fear, but in anticipation. Jesus is coming. Let’s get ready to greet Him.