

## “Ready for Takeoff?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
December 5, 2021 – The Second Sunday of Advent  
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

Are you ready for takeoff? Maybe, but only after your tray table and seat is in the upright and locked position; your carry-on bags are carefully stowed in an overhead bin or underneath the seat in front of you; your personal devices have been turned to airplane mode; you’re fully aware of the location of the nearest exit, keeping in mind that it may be behind you; you’ve learned how to fasten your seat belt and wear an oxygen mask if needed, knowing, of course, to put yours on before assisting a child; and you’ve been reminded of the regulations concerning messing with smoke detectors in the lavatory and, in these pandemic times, the current guidelines concerning your face covering.

But even once you do all these things, you’re still not *really* ready for takeoff until the pilot and co-pilots have gone through their own long lists of preflight checks and preparations. Up in the cockpit, they go through something like this 747 checklist (hold up 747 pilot’s checklist), which includes checking the navigation system (important!), the EEC pushbuttons (but of course!), and the FMC, ND, and PFD, along with a whole bunch of other system and gizmo checks and setups that those of us who don’t pilot 747s know nothing about (but are very glad that others do!).

But even once you’re ready and the pilots are ready, you’re still not ready for takeoff until the ground crews have done all of their work of filling the plane with fuel, stocking the galleys with food and drinks, loading everyone’s luggage, and hopefully removing the previous flight’s lavatory wastewater. And once the ground crews have done their work, you’re still not ready for takeoff until traffic control has guided the pilot into position and has ensured that the runway and airspace ahead of the plane is clean and clear.

Yes, there’s a lot of preparation that must be done before you are ready to take off and successfully and safely soar through the skies!

Today, on this Second Sunday of Advent, we are considering our own preparations as we get ready for the journey that lies before us in the coming

Christmas season. And just like when flying in a jumbo jet, it is good idea for us to pay attention to our own preflight checks and setups that we can more successfully and safely take off and soar in the celebratory season ahead and beyond.

Each year, we spend a whole lot of time and energy on getting ready for Christmas in the form of tree selecting and schlepping or assembling; home decorating; gift-buying and gift-giving; card-writing and card-sending; recipe-making and cookie-baking; and perhaps party-preparing or travel-planning as well. For some of us, the list of preparations is about as long as a 747 preflight checklist! Here in this room tonight, we will be enjoying the Christmas Cantata, which our choir and friends have been preparing for months now. Some Christmas and holiday shows that will be put on by dance troupes and theater companies have taken years to prepare. Surely, we care a lot about celebrating Christmas, and so we invest a great deal of our resources in our many preparations.

This year, dear followers of Christ, as we go about our Christmas prep busyness, let us not overlook the most important preparation of all: To prepare our hearts for a new coming of Christ in our lives and in the world, for this is the reason for the Advent season! So we heed the words of the prophet Malachi, who calls for us to prepare for the coming of the one who will purify us and our ways, the one who comes not to ruin us, but to restore us. And we pay attention to the prophet John, the son of Zechariah, who cried out in the wilderness for people to prepare the way for the coming of God in their lives through repentance.

When we do repent, meaning we turn, changing our minds and the direction of our lives to face the direction of God's choosing, we find forgiveness and newness, purification and restoration. By turning toward God, we make a straight path for God, a runway that is clear and ready for the coming of God into our lives, a runway that is readied for our own outward and upward journey.

Repentance can lead us to life, and so let us put that task at the top of our holiday to-do lists. Let us examine ourselves and consider all our ways of thinking and living. We should all ask ourselves: In what areas of my life am I facing in the wrong direction? What is keeping me from turning toward God and doing what God wants from me?

And we should consider how we as a congregation are moving in the direction of God's choosing. Are we holding on to old ways and traditions just because that's how we've been doing things since 1729? Or are we willing to let go of some of our older ways as we change and the world around us changes so that we can embrace new ways of being as a church that offer a greater blessing to the world around us. Friends, when we determine that it's time to let some of the old stuff go, know that it's OK to let the old stuff go!

And let us be like John and Malachi and the other prophets of old, who not only responded to God's call on their own lives, but who called those around them to face and move in the direction of God's choosing. Our voice should cry out not only in the lonely wildernesses, but in the busy public places and to the Emperor Tiberiuses, the Pontius Pilates, the Herods, the Annasas, and the Ciaiphases of our world. Our message of turning towards God's ways should not be hidden or quiet, but should be offered freely and confidently, especially to those hold power over others. Let us always cry out whenever we see people using their power in ways that cause harm to others. Let us always use our energies to boldly proclaim the message that if more of us can turn from our selfishly violent ways and embrace God's ways of selfless love, our world would not be so lost and hopeless.

Friends, let us repent, and let us call the world to change course and so prepare for the coming of Christ, that we as a human family might be readied to fly.  
Amen.