Let me just say up front that my opening illustration is not very exciting, but as you have probably figured out by now my life is not really that exciting. They are never going to do a fast-paced action-drama series like 24 based on a day in my life. That is because no one would tune in to watch things with descriptions like, “Phil realizes he forgot to put on the grill cover,” “Phil fixes lightbulb that had gone out in freezer” or “Phil is in the basement and is having trouble remembering what he went down to get.” So now, with your expectations significantly lowered, here is my opening illustration. The other day I was trying to put together the bulletin for our Thanksgiving Eve service (the one that two of you watched) and in an effort to reduce time, I was looking to copy a similar bulletin from a previous service. I looked on my computer and was unable to locate one so I then searched my email. I was able to find one in there but the intriguing thing about the email I found was that it was dated March 11th. I don’t want to be overly dramatic or in any way equate gravitas of what I discovered with the following examples, but it was sort of like finding a picture of someone on Waikiki Beach on December 6, 1941 or someone working at their office in the World Trade Center on September 10, 2001. The moment in which the photo was taken or the email was sent was from a time before, to use a technical term, things went kerflooey. My email on March 11th assumed that there would be a church service at which to use the bulletin and that church services would just sort of continue the way they had for my previous 49 years on this earth. But as we all know this has not been the case. Our Bishop shut down church services on March 17 and has not allowed them to resume since. Meaning that, as of today, we have gone 37 Sunday’s without church. If you like things in mathematical expressions here is what that works out to: of the possible Sunday’s so far this year we have not had church for 78% of them. I am guessing that when we rang in the New Year on January 1st no one thought that we would miss Church for most of the year. And my point with all of this is that we never know what tomorrow is going to bring. It may look like the day before or it might look like 2020 which bears very little resemblance to anything in the previous year. And I point this out not to chastise anyone for not paying closer attention to disease outbreaks in east central China, but rather to think about the words of Jesus we hear today in the context of the past nine months. Jesus says, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” Jesus is reminding us that we always need to be ready for his coming and that we cannot assume that tomorrow is going to look exactly like today.

As you know we just started Advent and Advent is not the time God put on the calendar in order to allow us to get in our shopping before Christmas, but is rather a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. And if we want to take it a little further, we can say that we are both remembering his coming a little over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem of Judea as well as making ourselves ready for his coming again. And this is a perfectly correct answer but I am not sure if it quite explains to us what we should be doing.

So, going back to my introduction, think about what life was like for you in early March. I assume, if you were like me, you were going about your life in pretty much the usual way. Maybe you were making preparations to go on a trip or perhaps you were thinking that you could wait until next week to pick up some more toilet paper. And so, if this was the case, in the middle of March you found yourself in a position where you were prepared for the wrong thing. We were not able to take that vacation we were planning because flights were cancelled and travel restrictions were enacted. Furthermore, if you were running short on toilet paper you might go weeks or months without being able to purchase any at the store and find yourself like the foolish bridesmaids begging your neighbors for a roll of Charmin. And so with this as a backdrop how do we go about making sure that in the season of Advent we are actually prepared for the right thing?

When I was deploying to Al Udeid back in 2018, I was waiting around in O’Hare for my flight to Norfolk, Virginia where I would catch my military flight. There were a number of people also waiting who were quite obviously military (they issue us all the same backpack if you want to know how I figured it out). Since none of us where in uniform we had to ask that most American of questions what do you do? That is what area were each of us in – communications, security forces and so on. So here is a fun thing you get to do when you are a chaplain, you get to watch people squirm a little when you say what you do. Often you will find yourself on the receiving end of a confession about how that person knows they should really get back to church and that faith is really important to them and so on. I bring this up to point out that on some level most of us know what being prepared looks like. When I said I was a chaplain people all of sudden realized that they were not making God the top priority in their life and that they needed to make some changes. It’s like the teenager who throws a party when their parents are out of town, they know what the place is supposed to look like when mom and dad get home.

And so, the question for us as we move into the season of Advent is this: Are the things for which we are preparing the things we actually need to be prepared for? Or are we preparing like we did before the rona hit and getting ready for all the wrong things? Are we making God our first priority or are we making vacation plans when a worldwide epidemic is about to hit? I cannot answer this question for you because it is one only you can answer. But to help us all get a good start in this season of Advent let me end with the prayer for self-dedication. It reads:

*Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*