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Advent II, Year B

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As some of you know, two weeks ago I tested for my black belt. I started studying Aikido back in August of 2004 and since then have trained consistently two to three times a week. This last year I have stepped it up to four or five times a week in order to get ready for the test. Throughout that time I had to work hard to overcome my weight (at the beginning I was 40 pounds heavier) and my complete lack of natural grace and coordination. At times I was so sore from doing break falls incorrectly or so discouraged by my lack of progress that I was tempted to quit. But I stuck with it until finally I got there. The testing process was an ordeal in and of itself. It consisted of an essay, an oral examination, a written test, an ego destroying practical exam and finally an hour long test and demonstration taken in front of family and friends. By the time I reached the end, I was emotionally and physically exhausted. Soaked with sweat I was overcome with waves of relief and joy and pride that brought me to the verge of tears. It was truly one of the great accomplishments of my life. My story is not atypical. At my dojo it takes even younger and more talented students an average of five years to reach black belt level. Yet I also know of people who study other martial arts at larger more commercial schools and earn their black belts much more quickly often in as little as a year or two. This occurs not because they are more talented or train more often, but because the standards of those dojos are much less strict. While I am sure that the students at those schools do indeed feel proud when they get their black belts, I also imagine that their sense of accomplishment must be much less than what I experienced. While I know that in truth I am still only a novice when it comes to the study of Aikido, I still feel a genuine sense of pride in what I have done. Whenever I look at my black belt I will know that I have earned it and will remember the way I felt when my test was finally over.

Even if you have never done martial arts, you still probably understand exactly what I mean. We all know the difference in how it feels when we get something the easy way versus when we really and truly earn it. A hard earned B in a class we really struggled with can be much more satisfying and meaningful than an easy A. Achievement always feels good but when it comes only after months or even years of practice and dedication, it tastes so much sweeter than if we just breezed our way to victory. It might be difficult to get there but the pride and joy of the moment when we finally do makes it all worthwhile. The value of those hard earned accomplishments cannot be underestimated for they have the potential to truly alter our lives.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. Apart from Easter, Christmas is the most important day of the Christian year. Yet sadly its real meaning and significance has been devalued. It has been reduced to one of those cheap accomplishments that just get handed to us without any real effort. We no longer have to earn it. Instead, the joy of Christmas has become a happy assumption. As a result we skip over the hard work of Advent and go straight to the celebration. But just as we find that we cannot find a meaningful Easter without the hard work of Lent, we cannot find a truly joyous Christmas without first committing ourselves to the preparation of Advent. The problem is that this season of Advent has become something of an enigma. We no longer really know what to do with it. In fact, for most of us Advent has become just a season for marking time, a countdown if you will, of how many days we have left to finish our shopping and decorating.

We must reclaim it. We must learn to use Advent to prepare our hearts and to amend our lives in order that we are ready to receive the coming Christ Child. In order to do this we must break from our routines. Isaiah calls on us to may straight the pathways of our hearts and lives so that G-D will find a straight and level highway. Only by breaking away from what is familiar and easy will we be able to prepare the way for our Lord. Sometimes our rituals and traditions help us draw closer to the divinity they represent. In our faith symbols and rituals can really help us understand the meaning of a major event such as Christmas. But sometimes those once meaningful rituals become routine. They lose their connection to the deeper spiritual event. When that happens the routine can overshadow or obscure the meaning they were originally supposed to point us towards. At no time is this more true than now.

Think about what you do to prepare for Christmas.... how much of it is spiritually focused? How much is focused on your relationship with G-D? For myself I can say that my preparations for Christmas do very little to

help me recognize my need for the coming of Christ into our world. All the gifts, cards and food, while enjoyable, in fact only make me more harried, more frazzled. In such a state, it is even more difficult to become quiet and reflect on the true meaning of Christmas. The preparations for the cultural celebration of Christmas have made it harder for me to engage in the real purpose of Advent. How can I focus on the God who is coming when I fighting traffic and endless lines at stores and the post office? How can I find faith when I am worried about the food I will serve. How can I draw closer to G-D when I am more focused on gifts? Does any of this sound familiar?

There are 3 short weeks remaining before Christmas. The question is how will we use them? Will we look at them only as "shopping days"? Or will we see them as the opportunity for spiritual preparation... as time to examine our hearts and lives? Are you prepared for the coming of the Christ? Have you allowed yourself any time to break away from the hustle and bustle enough to begin your search for Him? Have you broken away from the drive to consume enough to see the needs of those around you?

We all want Christmas to be both a joyful celebration and a meaningful spiritual event. In our secular culture that is a lot to ask. If we want celebrate not only with gifts and food but also with a sense of G-D's peace and love, then we have to earn it. It's not an easy fit. It doesn't come naturally. We can't just go through the motions of Christmas and expect it to be spiritually meaningful. We have to earn it. And so we must prepare. That means making the time for spiritual disciplines like prayer or reading meditations. It means spending less time focused on decorating your home and more time on preparing your heart. It may not come easy but if you put forth the effort, if you stay with it even if you don't feel any results at first, then when the day comes you will find that your Christmas celebration will have the power to truly transform and renew your spirit. And that will make the hard work all worthwhile.

AMEN