











ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year (though it can also be thought of as the end of the year, and has been in some Christian traditions). It starts four Sundays before Christmas. The season of Advent ends on Christmas Eve.

“Advent” means “coming.” During this season the church focuses on two things. First, she puts herself back in the position of old covenant Israel, longing for the sending of the

Messiah. In this way, the church remembers that Jesus came to fulfill the hopes and expectations of the faithful old covenant people in the nation of Israel. Hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Comfort, Comfort," "Savior of the Nations Come," and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," capture this sense of longing. This does *not* mean we are re-enacting redemptive history; we know we cannot turn back the clock. But we do enter into the story of Israel, realizing that her prayers for ultimate deliverance must be our prayers as well. Second, the church looks ahead to Christ's final return at the end of history. At the Last Day, Christ will come in power and glory to complete his work of redemption. The church lives in light of this eschatological expectation. Hymns like "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending" and "Lift Up Your Heads Ye Mighty Gates" capture this aspect of Advent. We long for Christ's final coming even as Israel longed for his first coming.

Thus, Advent is characterized by expectation – an expectation already fulfilled in the First Coming of Jesus into the world as the Son of God incarnate, to suffer and bear the sins of the world; and an expectation still to be fulfilled at his Final Coming, when this same Jesus returns, manifesting his kingship and judging all men. This double focus is seen in our bulletin cover, which depicts Jesus as a Lamb (the sign of his First Coming, in lowliness and humility) and shows an unfurled victory banner (representing his Final Coming in glory and dominion as the Judge of the earth). Advent reminds us that we live "between the times." Advent is a reminder of the "already" and the "not yet" – Christ has already come to establish his kingdom, and yet the final phase of that kingdom still awaits us. (Unfortunately, Advent gospel readings in the lectionary confuse the issue because they generally come from the Olivet Discourse of Jesus – Mt. 24-25, Mk. 13, and Lk. 24. But this prophetic teaching is primarily about the destruction of the temple and the end of the old covenant in 70 AD, *not* the Final Coming of Jesus. However, in another sense, those readings fit well, as they call attention to the end of the old covenant world order and the dawn of the new covenant, messianic age.)

How is Advent observed? Traditionally, Advent has been treated as a penitential season, much like Lent. It has been considered a time of mourning and fasting. There is a healthy discipline in this, especially for Americans who want what they want *now*. We do not like to wait. But just as Lent reminds us that the suffering of the cross comes before the glory of the resurrection, so Advent reminds us that repentance prepares the way for meeting the promised King and Redeemer (Isa. 40).

Americans, even American Christians, have essentially come to ignore Advent. At best, Advent is blurred into an extended Christmas season. Instead of focusing on repentance and self-denial, we count down shopping days and indulge ourselves. Instead of learning Advent hymns, we jump right into Christmas carols. Instead of preparing to meet the Coming One, we get ready for extended vacations.

If Christians in previous generations took the penitential aspect of Advent too far, we have wrongly neglected this dimension altogether. The solution is not going back to a penitential observance. (Even the Roman Catholic Church no longer treats Advent as a penitential time.) It seems the best practice is to focus on Advent primarily as a time of *patient waiting* and *expectant hoping*. Advent reminds us that one aspect of a life of faith

is waiting on God to fulfill his promises. The expectation of Advent reminds us that there is an “already” as well as a “not yet” aspect to the kingdom. We have not received the full fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ. More is still to come. And yet, our expectation is not a kind of joyless waiting; instead it is a time of eager longing, of waiting on tip toe, of looking with a sure hope for what God has promised. Think of Advent as preparation for a party. It’s delayed gratification, but it will pay off when the celebration time (Christmas) finally arrives. It’s a period of darkness, but the dawn is about to break.

Thus, while we will try to sing primarily Advent hymns during Advent (saving the Christmas songs mainly for Christmas season), we can still sneak in a Christmas hymn here and there during Advent (especially during the last two weeks of Advent), because the sense of expectation is so heightened. Advent is time of expectant joy as we prepare for the even greater joy of Christmas.

However, in the midst of Advent’s building joy, we should not neglect the theme of repentance. The central figure of Advent is John the Baptist. John was the forerunner of Jesus. He was born just before Jesus, and his ministry prepared the way for Israel to meet her God in the person of Jesus. But his eschatological message – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” is just as appropriate in preparation for the Final Coming of Jesus as it was for his First Coming. It is the keynote announcement of Advent.

The traditional color for Advent is purple because it is the color of royalty, as well as the penitential color used for Lent. Today, it is not uncommon for churches to use blue as the primary Advent color. This is a good custom, in that distinguishes the expectant nature of Advent from the more somber season of Lent. Of course, red and green are also used as Advent and Christmas colors in more secular settings (though historically churches have often practiced a “greening” of the sanctuary, hanging evergreens and hollies to point to Jesus as the ever-living one and to his bloody sacrifice).

A favorite Advent tradition is the lighting of the Advent wreath. We will do this during the processional hymn at the beginning of our liturgy. The wreath has five candles – one for each of the four Sundays in Advent, plus the Christmas candle. Advent moves us into the very darkest time of the year (the winter solstice). But it is precisely into that darkness that God sends his Son to be the light of the world. The increasing light reflects our increasing joy as we move closer to the birth of the incarnate Son of God.

A rather recent development in Advent observance is the Lessons and Carols service. The Lessons and Carols program intertwines Bible readings with traditional Advent and Christmas music. It evolved out of historic pre-Christmas celebrations and was first celebrated in its present format in the late nineteenth century at King’s College Chapel in Cambridge. The goal of the Lessons and Carols service is for us to enter more fully, liturgically and experientially, into the story of the coming of the Son of God into human history in human flesh to redeem us from the curse of sin and death. The readings and songs move from promise to fulfillment, from prophecy to realization, from type and

shadow to reality. The service is thus intended to bridge the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Christmas season celebrates the birth of the Christ child as fulfillment of all God's promises. Historically, we remember the birth of Mary's special baby, the Savior of sinners. Theologically, we focus on the miracle of the incarnation, as God becomes man. The ecclesiastical celebration of Christmas traces back to at least the fourth century, though that means it was a rather late addition to the church calendar (other seasons such as Epiphany and Easter were already being celebrated). No one knows the exact date Jesus was born, but late December is a symbolically appropriate time (Isa. 9:2; Mal. 4:2). The date was selected close to the winter solstice, replacing pagan festivals that had been celebrated at that time of year. Even as Christian churches displaced pagan temples, church celebrations replaced the old pagan holy days as well. The Christian calendar evolved as a way of inhabiting, embodying, and retelling the Christian narrative, centered in the life and mission of Jesus.

Christmas season lasts twelve days, beginning December 25, and gives way to the season of Epiphany on January 6. (The night of January 5 is called "Twelfth Night," concluding the twelve days of Christmas.) Christmas is a time of great rejoicing and feasting. Because our culture has largely secularized and commercialized Christmas, it is important for us to keep in mind the true reason for the celebration, namely, the fulfillment of God's covenant pledge to be our God and live among us in humility, holiness, and mercy. The exchanging of gifts, feasting together, and so on, are all wonderful, but we should keep Jesus at the center of everything. This season is about the mystery of the incarnation – God becoming man to dwell among us and redeem us from our sins. While it is easy to sentimentalize about a young Jewish girl and her baby (and some Christmas music encourages this, unfortunately!), we need to celebrate Christmas for what it is: the sending ("mass" is from the Latin word for "sending") of the Christ into the world to rescue us from sin and evil. Christmas focuses attention on the incarnation as the center of the Christian story, and affirms the goodness of creation. Because Christianity is an embodied, earthy, incarnational faith, it is entirely right for us to enjoy God's good gifts in the created order (presents, feasting, singing, family gatherings, etc.) during this time, remembering continually that Jesus stands behind it all. As William Temple said, "Christianity is the most materialistic of the world's religions." And yet this incarnational celebration of the goodness of God's created gifts should not lapse into crass American hedonism, materialism, and secularism.

Christmas celebrations were controversial among some early Protestants, including the Puritans who settled in the New England colonies in the seventeenth century. For example, in Massachusetts, Christmas celebrations were outlawed until 1681. December 25 did not become a legal holiday in America until 1856. Because American Christians were ambivalent about the celebration of Christmas, our observance is often stunted and backwards (e.g., a one day celebration rather than a twelve day celebration; no sense of Advent preparation; etc.). The reason for the Puritan antipathy towards Christmas was manifold. The day was regarded as a holdover from Romanism (it's *Christmass*, after all!). It was considered a violation of the regulative principle of worship since it was not explicitly commanded in Scripture (though this ignored the fact that God gave his

people a redemptive calendar in the old covenant, which can serve as the model for a new covenant calendar). In Britain, Christmas observances got entangled with a slough of church/state issues, in which the crown had attempted to impose a particular set of liturgical practices on the people through the Anglican church. Defying Christmas customs had become associated with taking a stand for the freedom of the church from state control. And so on. It was not until many of these issues faded into the background that American Protestants were willing to embrace the Christmas holiday.

Christmas celebrations as we tend to know them today are a conglomeration of biblical themes and customs that have arisen over the centuries in various Christianized nations, many of which were imported from Europe to America, especially during waves of nineteenth century immigration. For example, the figure of St. Nicholas (Santa Claus) is based on a true, historical figure. St. Nicholas served as the Bishop of Myra, was known to help the poor, and is best remembered for punching out an Arian heretic at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. Of course, various legends have grown up around his life story and many were transmitted to America largely through Dutch immigrants. St. Nicholas became associated with Christmas because his "saint day" falls close to Christmas itself. Christmas trees were likely taken over from pagan customs, but their symbolism was easily suffused with biblical content. Evergreen trees represent Jesus as our Tree of Life, and remind us of the cross. The ornaments represent the fruits of Christian culture, as the kingdom of Christ transforms the world. Lights point us to Christ as the light of the world. The giving of gifts is a wonderful way we can imitate God's gift of his Son to us (Jn. 3:16) and has biblical precedent (Esther 9:18-19; Mt. 2:11). Of course, many other Christmas traditions have a purely secular origin, but are usually quite harmless. Instead of rejecting as many Christmas practices as possible, we harness them and use them to teach and train our children.

Christmas has been blessed with some of the finest hymnody in the whole church year. Favorites include "O Come All Ye Faithful," "Hark! The Herald Angel Sings," "Good Christian Men Rejoice," and "On This Day Earth Shall Ring." (Some scholars even think the "Twelve Days of Christmas" song is loaded with theological meaning: <http://www.cresourcei.org/cy12days.html>). The primary liturgical color for the Christmas season is white, pointing to the purity of Christ. Gold, red, and green are also used.

We make a few subtle but important liturgical changes to mark the Advent and Christmas seasons. Obviously, the hymns, the call to worship, and the lectionary readings are driven by the themes of the season. In addition, we drop our sung confession of sin, and we revert back to the short Doxology and the "Sanctus Benedictus" before the Lord's Supper. These are ways of de-glorifying the service so that we can add glory back in during the proper seasons of the year. The "Sanctus Benedictus" is used during Advent, Christmas, and Lent, because the combination of texts it is based upon (Isa. 6 + Ps. 118) remind us that in these seasons our exalted Lord (Isa. 6) comes to us in humble form (a baby in a manger, a man on a cross; cf. Mt. 21:7-9). For our hymn of intercession, we may use Mary's song, taken from Luke 1, and known as "The Magnificat" (after the first word in the Latin text). Our song of dismissal is taken from Simeon's Song in Luke 2, known as "The Nunc Dimittis" (also from the opening

words in Latin). Both these songs capture the full sense of the Advent/Christmas cycle of hope and hope fulfilled.