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Advent

The Season of Hope

Fullness of Time series

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The Fullness of Time

Series Preface

Esau McCaulley, Series Editor

Christians of all traditions are finding a renewed appreciation for the church year. This is evident in the increased number of churches that mark the seasons in their preaching and teaching. It's evident in the families and small groups looking for ways to recover ancient practices of the Christian faith. This is all very good. To assist in this renewal, we thought Christians might find it beneficial to have an accessible guide to the church year, one that's more than a devotional but less than an academic tome.

The Fullness of Time project aims to do just that. We have put together a series of short books on the seasons and key events of the church year, including Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These books are reflections on the moods, themes, rituals, prayers, and Scriptures that mark each season.

These are not, strictly speaking, devotionals. They are theological and spiritual reflections that seek to provide spiritual formation by helping the reader live fully into the practices of each season. We want readers to understand how the church is forming them in the likeness of Christ through the church calendar.

These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for comments from historians pointing out minutiae. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus.

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Yearning

Three Advents of Christ

As the calendar year winds down, as the days darken and grow short, as Christmas songs spill from crowded stores and children set about making wish lists for Santa, the church's year dawns. On the fourth Sunday before Christmas, Advent begins. The first day of Advent is our Christian New Year's Day. It kicks off the entire cycle of the liturgical calendar, which through each passing week will slowly unfurl the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit.

We begin our Christian year in waiting. We do not begin with our own frenetic effort or energy. We do not begin with the merriment of Christmas or the triumph of Easter. We do not begin with the work of the church or

the mandate of the Great Commission. Instead, we begin in a place of yearning. We wait for our king to come.

The word *advent* derives from the Latin *adventus*, which means "coming." The liturgical season of Advent is the time in which we prepare for and look forward to the coming of Christ.

Christians, of course, believe that Christ has already come. Jesus has already brought the kingdom of God near. He has already stretched out his hands to heal and to bless. He has already been broken on the cross and defeated death. He has already poured out his Spirit. So why do we reenter a season of waiting each year? What are we waiting for?

We Christians believe, however, not just in one coming of Christ but in three: the coming of Christ in the incarnation (theologians have sometimes called this the *adventus redemptionis*, the coming of redemption), the coming of Christ in what Scripture terms "the last days" (the *adventus glorificamus*, the coming in glory), and the coming of Christ in our present moment, through the Holy Spirit's work and through Word and sacrament (the *adventus sanctificationis,* the coming of holy things or holiness).[1] Advent celebrates and holds together all three "comings" of Christ.

It is a deeply paradoxical season, at once past, present, and future. Ancient yet urgent.

When we enter into the waiting of Advent, we do so not primarily as individuals but with all people of faith throughout time and around the globe. When we worship together each week, we join our voices, as the Anglican liturgy says, "with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven."[2] Because of this, the church calendar as a whole—and Advent specifically—is a way to reach toward timelessness through time itself. It is a season marked by days and weeks, yet through it we enter into the eternal story of God and God's work on earth.

The Coming of Christ in the Incarnation

In Advent we intentionally join our brothers and sisters in the Old Testament who waited faithfully for the Messiah to come. We seek to enter their perspective and take on their posture. Of course, we live our lives in AD, in the year of our Lord, not BC. But "Advent itself is always BC!" writes Malcolm Guite. "The whole purpose of Advent is to be for a moment fully and consciously Before Christ."[3]

We know that Christ has come, and yet the season of Advent calls us out of our time-bound moment to remember and perform the whole drama of Scripture. Through the liturgical calendar we don't merely retell the story of the gospel; we enter it. In this way the church calendar is like immersive theater.[4]

In immersive theater, no one is simply a spectator watching a play. The distinction between actors and audience is broken down and everyone becomes a character in the story. In the same way, in Advent we join the people of Israel waiting for the coming Messiah. We reenact their yearning for and anticipation of the coming king. Though we now know the story of Christmas—the story of Jesus' first coming—we imaginatively enter into the confusion, longing, frustration, and sense of dreams deferred that the people of Israel felt year after year, generation after generation. We prepare for the joy of Christmas by waiting on the dark streets of Bethlehem, our eyes straining to glimpse the dawning of that everlasting light.

In the book of Luke, Jesus has a strange exchange with the Sadducees where he points out that Moses called the Lord "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Jesus says, "He is not the God of the

dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive" (Luke 20:37-38). Because "to him all are alive," the God we worship is still the God of Abraham, still the God of Isaac, still the God of Jacob. So even though we live two thousand years after Jesus' birth, it is appropriate—even vital—for us to join in the ache of these Old Testament saints, not only in our imaginations but through the mysterious reality of the communion of saints across time. When we participate in the season of Advent we are taking part in the corporate longing of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, Moses, Miriam, Isaiah, and Ruth. We are bearing their burdens and their stories.

In the medieval church, as the season of Advent was taking shape, Christians developed a pattern of praying together seven prayers that reference descriptions of the Messiah from the Old Testament. These prayers are poetry, telling us what Christ is like through metaphor without saying the name of Jesus directly. Instead they call to Jesus using other names given in Scripture: "O Wisdom!" "O Adonai!" "O Root!" "O Key!" "O Light!" "O King of the Nations!" "O Emmanuel!"

These are called the "O Antiphons" because the church sang these prayers antiphonally, back and forth, by call

and response. They are now sung by some churches on the seven days leading up to Christmas Eve. Many churches, however, have lost this ancient practice, but an echo of the tradition remains in the beloved Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," which is taken from the final O Antiphon.

These poetic prayers reverberate with longing and hope. They tell us we need a rescuer and a ransom. They remind us that, even if we had never heard the name of Jesus, we would still need all he came to give. We need "wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High." We need Adonai—the Lord—to "come and redeem us with an outstretched arm." We need the root of Jesse to nourish us. We need the key of David to unlock the chains that imprison us. We need the rising dawn, "the radiance of the Light eternal and Sun of Justice." We need the king of the nations, the deepest "desire of all." And we need Immanuel, God with us.[5]

The O Antiphons remind us that the first coming of Christ should not be taken for granted, nor should its significance be consigned to the past. All the groaning of creation, all the tragedies and miseries of history, all the confusion and ignorance that characterized humanity

before Christ remain with us now, even in the age of our Lord. There are billions of people today who, like those in the Old Testament, have never heard the story of Jesus. And we who have heard and believed the good news often find ourselves mired in fear, unbelief, sin, and sorrow. Because of this, we not only recall those who waited for Christ; we join with them each year to tell of the one who answers the yearning of every human heart and the desire of every nation.

The longing of Advent begins in the first pages of the Bible. In Genesis we watch with horror as sin enters the world through the rebellion of Adam and Eve. Poison is poured into the stream of humanity and death breaks loose on the earth. The wreckage is devastating and pervasive. Because of the fall there is brokenness in our bodies, in our interior lives, in our relationships with each other, in nature, in culture, and in societal systems. Our desires have become disordered and discordant, and we are now at odds with others and with God himself.

Then, in Genesis 3:15, there is the first whisper of hope:

> I will put enmity
> between you and the woman,
> and between your offspring and hers;

he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.

Theologians calls this the *protevangelion*, the first gospel, which foreshadows the good news to come. It is the first hint that, though everything seems shattered beyond repair, God has not left us. Help is on the way. Generation after generation, through the promises of Abraham, the enslavement of the Jewish people, the deliverance of the exodus, through prophets and psalms, through the establishment and destruction of the temple, through exile and return, the people of God waited for God's anointed.

Slowly—painfully slowly—promises were unveiled to God's people of one who was coming whose kingdom would have no end. And slowly the people of Israel realized that these promises were not only for their own rescue but for all nations, ethnicities, and people groups. They waited and hoped, not knowing what was to come, unable to skip to the end of the book, unable to see what lay ahead.

Advent is a time to ready ourselves for the celebration of the incarnation, and this is no small task. The way we celebrate Christmas can easily become sentimental and trite. We are so familiar with the story—the little lambs

and the shepherds, the Christmas star and the stockings—that we fail to notice the depth of pain, chaos, and danger of the world into which Jesus was born.[6] Christmas with its compulsory jollification and insistence on being the "hap-hap-happiest season of all" devolves into saccharine escapism if we do not first take note of the darkness in the world and in our own lives.

Part of why we observe Advent is to make Christmas weird again, to allow the shock of the incarnation to take us aback once more. The movie *Talladega Nights* has a famous scene in which Will Ferrell's character prays to the "eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus." It's his "favorite Jesus." This kind of laughable mawkishness springs from our casual overfamiliarity with the Christmas story divorced from the larger story of the fall of the world and God's redemption through Israel.

We rush too quickly to carols and bells and a sweet little "eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus" and lose sight of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah—the one who is wisdom, Adonai, root, key, light, king, and Immanuel.

By entering into the larger story of redemptive history, we begin to feel our need of a deliverer again. We wipe away the fake snow and tinsel, the felt-board shepherds

and friendly beasts, and lean into the ache of the cosmos, the sorrow and struggle of all creation.

Just as we are tempted to skip over the devastation of Good Friday and rush ahead to the good news of Easter, we can hurry to the hope of the incarnation and refuse to glimpse the depth of confusion and pain of the oppressed people of Israel, longing for God's shalom in a world devoid of peace. But in the same way that ignoring the horror of the cross inevitably belittles the resurrection, when we overlook the captivity and yearning of Israel, we end up missing the glory of that holy night in Bethlehem.

In the church calendar, every season of celebration is preceded by a season of preparation. In Advent, we prepare our hearts, minds, and bodies to receive the good news that awaits us in the twelve days of Christmas.

I did not grow up observing Advent—I didn't even really know what it was. Like many Americans, my family began celebrating Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. When I started attending an Anglican church in my late twenties, Advent drew me in. With its quiet beauty and doleful hymns, this season made intuitive emotional sense to me. Before we celebrate the birth of Christ, we

remember the pain of labor—we wait with this whole longing world, with all of creation, groaning for redemption to be born. We face the darkness before we celebrate the dawn.

We prepare for Christmas not only with shopping lists and decorations but by making space for mourning. We join with Israel in lamentation. We wait, as the hymn says, "in lowly exile here, until the Son of God appears."

The Coming of Christ in the Present

In John 14 Jesus tells the disciples that soon he will be going away, but he will not leave them as orphans. He will send the Holy Spirit, the "comforter" or "advocate" who will testify to the truth of everything Jesus has told them.

At Pentecost this promise is fulfilled. The people of God become the church, adopted as brothers and sisters into a new global family. Today we in the church continue to live in the same Spirit that shocked the disciples and the watching world at Pentecost. "The 'distance' between Peter-the-Disciple and Peter-the-Apostle is far greater than that between Peter and us," writes theologian Michael Horton. "After all, Peter-the-Apostle lived on this

side of 'these last days,' as do we." Horton says a child can now recognize "Jesus in his saving office more fully than did Jesus' own brothers during his earthly ministry. This is because we live with the Apostle Peter on this side of Pentecost, where the age that Jesus inaugurated is at work, disrupting the powers and principalities that keep us from recognizing him."[7]

Pentecost gets its own liturgical season, but here in Advent we recall the hope it represents because we look for the coming of Christ not only in the incarnation but in our daily lives. Jesus came to us in the incarnation, but his work continues in us, through us, and all around us.

In Advent we take time to reflect on how Jesus, whom the people of Israel longed for, meets us today. We look at the places in our own lives where we yearn for Christ to come, places where we need hope, encouragement, help, and deliverance.

In Advent we also notice how Christ continues his work in the world. In years that feel full of turmoil—times where political strife, war, and global suffering dominate the news—I find myself hungry for Advent. In 2020, during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, I could not wait for Advent to begin. I needed it. I needed a time

when we as a church could grieve the pain and sin in the world and wait for Christ to come, even now.

Advent is the season when we practice watching for grace. It is a time when we pay extra attention to how Christ continues to come, how he enters into the darkest corners of humanity and of our own lives. It is a time when we invite Christ to meet us and, in the words of Rich Mullins, to "shake us forward and shake us free."[8]

Advent is also the time when we recall that Christ comes to us actually and tangibly through the means of grace: through the Scriptures, through baptism, and through the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist). That these are called the *means* of grace reminds us that grace is not a free-floating force, much less a warm, spiritual feeling, untethered from the earth and human history. Instead, grace is the reality that God is at work. And his work is most often through earthy things. These means of grace are the reliable ways in which we know Christ in the present. They are sturdy crags, handholds that allow us to continue in the way of Christ and offer us the presence of Christ, week in and week out.

Christ came to us in the incarnation, and he keeps coming to us through the Spirit. We are buried with him and raised with him in baptism (see Romans 6:3-4),

washed in the water of regeneration (see Titus 3:5). We are given bread from heaven (see John 6:32) and his body and blood through the Eucharist (see 1 Corinthians 10:16). We receive the Word through his word, read and preached in the church.

We begin our year not only by waiting but by readying ourselves to receive the gifts of repentance, healing, and restoration that God gives by grace. We come to God openhanded, holding our imperfect and incomplete lives before him. We need him to come to us, to rescue and restore us, even today, in our everyday lives.

The Final Coming of Christ

"Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again."[9]

Every week at our church we say these mysterious words (called the "memorial acclamation") just before we receive the Eucharist. These words are what N. T. Wright has called a "portable story"—a short statement that sums up the larger narrative of the Christian faith.[10]

"Christ will come again." With these words we recall the third way we wait for Christ's coming in Advent.

Amid the familiarity and decorum of our weekly worship service, the strangeness of what we are

proclaiming can be lost. But this is mind-boggling, imagination-bending stuff. We wait for Jesus to return, as John of Patmos has it, on "a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True," the armies of heaven following him, a sharp sword "coming out of his mouth" to judge the nations, and a robe inscribed "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:11-16).

In her book *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, Fleming Rutledge says the *adventus glorificamus*, or Christ's coming in glory, is the chief and most important focus of Advent. It's also the primary focus of Advent throughout church history. Through this season we join with the whole historic and global church in waiting for Christ to come and finally set all things right.

When I first began to practice Advent, my focus was almost entirely on preparing for Christmas. I was surprised to discover, however, that Advent is uncomfortably and unavoidably apocalyptic, more concerned with a vast cosmic battle than dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh. In late December, this preoccupation with the world to come can feel bizarre, if not downright Scroogey.

But waiting for Jesus' final return tinges the whole of Advent. Few of the Scripture readings and prayers in

Anglican Advent services are about the nativity (only in the fourth week do we set our sights on the annunciation and Mary's Magnificat). Again and again the actual experience of Advent in my church community, and in particular the Scripture readings I heard each Sunday, reminded me that this season is mostly about the end of this present age and the beginning of another. It is about the birth of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). "Advent . . . differs from the other seasons in that it looks beyond history altogether," writes Rutledge. "In the cycle of the seasons and festival days that takes the church through the life of Christ, it is Advent that gives us the final consummation; it is the season of the last things."[11]

Jesus is coming, this time not as a vulnerable baby but as a powerful and conquering king, a merciful and just judge, to subdue sin and death and to birth a new world. Death will be undone. Tears will be wiped away. The tree of life, whose leaves will bring "the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2), will be the divine answer to the tree that brought destruction in the first pages of Genesis. Humanity will dwell again with God in a restored Eden.

This is very good news. At least it ought to be. Yet at times Christians have made the return of Christ seem

either hokey or horrifying. In much of the popular media surrounding the "rapture" and the "apocalypse"—books, films, tracts, and so on—teachings about the *eschaton*, or the end times, are used as a scare tactic: give your life to Jesus or you'll have to endure catastrophes to come. When I think of the second coming of Christ, my mind flits between Tim Lahaye's Left Behind series, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and bumper stickers that proclaim, "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." My husband's childhood church in Georgia had an in-case-of-rapture vault (no joke) that contained a TV, a VCR, and a video explanation of what to do after the rapture had occurred and you were left behind. I suppose they hoped someone would stumble in and find it amid the apocalypse.

Churches with rapture vaults would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of Christians throughout time. The idea of the rapture as it's popularly conceived sprung up around the nineteenth century.[12] But as a child and a teenager, my husband didn't know this had not always been the church's teaching about Scripture. These ideas were in part why he gave up on church for a while after he left home for college.

These bizarre teachings are not good news. Bad second-coming theology has done a number on our theological imaginations. It has made the return of Christ seem like the stuff of badly written fan fiction, apocalyptic horror, and anti-intellectual pie-in-the-sky escapism. These novel teachings have made many Christians anxious about a doctrine that has historically been a chief source of hope for the church. In order to faithfully and fully enter into this "coming" of Advent, then, we may have some unlearning to do.

We Christians believe that Christ will, as the Nicene Creed says, "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." This is God's definitive response to the deepest longings of the human soul. It is our hope that truth, beauty, and goodness will last, and that evil, sorrow, and death will not. It is the promise that we and all of the cosmos are not doomed to fate and left on our own, but that we will be made whole and new.

Advent, ultimately, is a season of hope, which is why it is mostly about Christ coming in glory. This is the truest object of our hope. We celebrate that Jesus came in his incarnation and find comfort in how he comes to us in our daily lives, but all of our longings meet their end in Christ coming again, bringing healing, peace, joy, and an

unimaginable wholeness in his wake. The final return of Christ is the undoing of cancer. It is the utter dismantling of white supremacy and racism. It is the delivery of justice for the victimized, for the weakest and the most vulnerable whom the powerful have brutalized with seeming impunity. It is the regeneration of dead coral reefs. It is the end of global pandemics. It is the vindication of those falsely imprisoned. It is the weeping of children giving way to their eternal laughter. It is the death of death.

This hope utterly changes our relationship with the present. It is not that our life today does not matter. The relationships we make, the people we are becoming, the worship we render is eternal, and that reality lends depth and meaning to our lives in the present tense. But Advent reminds us that awaiting the final coming of Jesus is—and has always been—the essential posture of every Christian. No matter how sophisticated our technology or how privileged our lives, the Christian faith tells us that what we most long for is not to be found till the end of time.

In the resurrection of Jesus, we see the first evidence that the whole world will be made new. For now we live between Christ's finished work on the cross and his finished work on the throne. Things are not new yet. There

is much pain and agony in this "time between the times." The world is a dark place. We can and must seek light, pursue justice, and agitate for change. This is part of the call of the church. Yet we must also acknowledge that any good we achieve, any justice we secure, is always partial and provisional. It is always, as Steve Garber says, "proximate justice."[13] Ultimately, this weary world waits for the world to come. The good news we look forward to in Advent, then, as Catholic priest Charles Riepe says, is "Jesus' glorious coming to complete his Easter work." So critical is this aspect of our faith that "the church goes so far as to set aside an entire liturgical season to the end of the world and the final coming of the Lord."[14]

We begin each Christian year looking ahead beyond time itself. We begin each year asking, "Will this be the year of Christ's coming?"

Living the Three Advents of Christ

Advent collapses time. The past, present, and future join together in a single season of waiting for Immanuel, God With Us.

There are two ways of talking about time in the Greek language in which the New Testament was written. One

is *chronos*. This refers to the succession of time as we experience it, one linear moment after the next. *Chronos* is time that can be measured and kept in weeks, days, hours, and seconds. The other is *kairos*. This is the "fullness of time." This is the time of eternity. *Kairos* time marks the watersheds in human history and in our lives—moments that feel outside of time.

Advent happens in *chronos*, but, like all liturgical seasons, it steps into *kairos*. The whole church calendar—but especially Advent, with its three comings—is the interweaving of *kairos* and *chronos*. Past, present, and future are all equally present to us in this season. We wait with Israel in the past, we wait for Christ in the present, and we wait for his final coming in the future. Through *kairos*, Advent teaches us to enter into *chronos* as a different kind of people.

My yearly practice of waiting on these three comings of Christ shows me that I often forget how to wait on the Lord. I begin to believe I am the master and maker of my own life. I begin to believe that joy is self-made through my own ingenuity and hard work. I begin to believe that the things I most long for are within my grasp if I can only master the mad task of controlling my own life. I begin to

believe I am the engineer of my own deliverance. And into these fevered deceptions, Advent comes each year and quietly asks me to pause, to remember that we do not bring the kingdom of God to the world through our own effort or on our own timeline. We wait for one outside of us and outside of time. We wait for our coming king.

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