

Three Advents: Jesus Comes Again and Again

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The season of Advent begins again this coming Sunday. In the life of the church, Advent marks the beginning of a new year. It's a season of preparation, of anticipation, of hope.

Our society is not very good at this task of preparation and anticipation. We want to jump right into something. We want to celebrate early, and for that reason, Advent is a difficult season to celebrate. All around us, people and retailers and advertisers and marketers are already celebrating Christmas, and in these short days of December, Christmas carols play in an endless loop.

So how can we mark this season of preparation, anticipation, and hope while everyone else is already celebrating? Somebody noted recently that we should be talking about a "war on Advent" instead of a "war on Christmas."

"Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming." We prepare to celebrate the arrival, the birth, of the one whom Christians name "the Light of the world."

That's why one of the practices of Advent is to light candles. Many churches set up an Advent wreath, a ring of greenery which contains five candles. The greenery symbolizes life in the same way as a Christmas tree in the dead of winter is a sign of life. Most churches have changed to using blue candles instead of purple, marking a change in the way of thinking about Advent. It's no longer a season of penitence, but a celebration of hope and anticipation. In the centre of the ring, a white candle waits to be lit on Christmas Eve.

Each week, we light one more candle. Some churches name the candles—the Candles of Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and the Christ Candle. Others name the candles as the Prophecy candle, the Bethlehem candle, the Shepherds' candle, the Angels' candle, and the Purity candle.

It's fine to do that. But doing so diminishes the power of the candles as symbols. They don't "stand for" something. Rather, the candles participate in the primal symbol of light. We've lost the power of this primal symbol in a world where we can turn on the lights with the flick of a switch.

As we light these candles, the light grows week by week. We start in darkness on the First Sunday of Advent, the first day of a new year for the church, and we light a single flickering candle. It is fragile; the light can easily be snuffed, so we guard and care for this frail light, shielding it to hold the darkness at bay as we prepare in hope. Week by week, the light grows until the world is ablaze when the Christ candle is lit at Christmas.

Entering the darkness and shining light is an important part of our Advent celebration. We enter the shadows of despair, war, sorrow, and hate. In that kind of world, we wait actively for Jesus to be present. We light candles as a sign of growing hope and light. We embody that hope as we live peacefully, joyfully, lovingly. We wait. We sing. We pray anew for light—in-the-midst-of-shadows.

Our hope is challenged when we move into those places where all hope seems lost—the desperate refugee family; the isolated prisoner; the heartbroken addict; the shivering homeless person; the widow/widower who struggles to make it through this season; the first responder traumatized by PTSD; the spouse caring for a lifetime partner who is slipping into dementia; the hospital worker who is running on fumes; the family which works multiple jobs for shelter and food; the horrors of war; the violence of political rhetoric.

Followers of Jesus enter the shadows carrying the fragile light within us. We proclaim a hope that rings out in the midst of catastrophe. In the gloom of this time, we point to the light which is just barely visible. We prepare for the coming of one whose name is Peace, Light, Hope.

Advent is not just a time of “waiting around.” Rather, we keep watch. We remain ready to act in hope and compassion. The anticipation of Advent is a dynamic waiting.

The 12th century abbot and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux wrote eloquently about “three Advents.”

The first Advent is the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation. We tell the story of an unwed teenaged Palestinian woman bearing a child, giving birth as a poor peasant in the place where animals lay. In Matthew’s story, that young family became refugees, rushing to Egypt in fear of their lives as the murderous King Herod sought to kill the child.

The third Advent is the Advent at the end of the age, the Parousia when Jesus comes again to set everything right. This last Advent heralds the full coming of God’s kingdom, for which we pray every time we utter the Lord’s Prayer— “your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.”

The second Advent is the one in between, the everyday arrival of Jesus: the knock at the door; the still, small voice; the hungry mother seeking food for herself and her children; the migrant worker; the weary refugee; the asylum seeker; the tired, cold, homeless person begging for a word of comfort, a dollar of hope. Leo Tolstoy tells the story of this Advent beautifully in “Where Love Is, God Is,” also known as “Martin the Cobbler.”

In my mind this second Advent is most important of all, for it happens in the thick of our everyday lives. We learn to discern where Jesus comes again and again. We hold the growing, flickering light amid the shadows of the world within us. Our hope spurs us to action as we seek where we may find the Christ child amid poverty, pain, and dispossession.

In this second Advent, we learn anew that faith is a verb. Faith is how we embody God’s love, God’s justice, God’s peace, God’s intention for our world.