

An Unwelcome Guest

Welcome to Advent! Advent, this season that steals in upon us in late November, and then carries us along through the December darkness to the eve of Christmas. Advent, this strange and somewhat unwelcome season that descends upon our time of Christmas preparations, and hangs around the edges of our lives like a brooding guest.

I say this every year, so I know you've heard it before, and you may be getting tired of me saying it, but it is only once a year, so I'll say it again: I think we have decidedly mixed feelings about Advent. Or maybe even not so mixed: most of us of just plain don't like Advent. It really does seem like an unwelcome guest, some relatively modern invention of the church that seems designed to steal or to deflate the joy we want to feel at this time of the year, like a liturgical Grinch Who Stole Christmas, robbing us of our Christmas carols and replacing them with those high-fibre Advent hymns.

For some of us, this dislike is a function of growing up in a church tradition that didn't celebrate Advent. Many United Church congregations, and many other Protestant churches as well, did not mark Advent as a season until relatively recently; it wasn't until the reforms that came in the Catholic Church in the 1960s began to ripple out

into ecumenical dialogue in the 1970s and 1980s that Advent starting making an appearance in many of our churches.

Before then, December in the church was the slow and steady build-up to Christmas, proceeding along side-by-side with what was going on in the world outside the church—those moments that marked Christmas's approach. Like the arrival of Christmas catalogues with pages and pages of toys to fantasize about finding under the tree: I used to spend countless hours as a child, poring over each page.

Or the first snowfall, that brought thoughts of Santa to mind. And Christmas concerts and pageants at school; Christmas lights going up all over town; Christmas baking; and Christmas music, on the record player at home, and in all the stores.

The church went along with all those cultural patterns: the baking, and the decorating, and the music. Until this Advent thing came along, and started messing with all of that. So, it's no wonder that Advent doesn't get a warm reception from us. It seems new and strange, and it seems to rob us of cherished traditions and memories.

Yet—as I do every year—I want to help you to see that Advent is a gift, a gift that the church has to offer to the

world, a gift that every year seems more and more needed.

You may have detected a theme in my preaching lately: the idea that the church is somehow “countercultural.” That instead of moving along in tandem with the culture around us, that the church sometimes challenges, critiques, or confronts the culture in which we live.

That’s part of what I’m talking about with Advent. The culture wants us to celebrate Christmas, and the church, with Advent, says ‘Hold on a minute there.’ The church is challenging the culture there, being countercultural.

Now, to the extent that we *want* to be in sync with the culture, the church’s countercultural stance can be an aggravation. It’s that ‘Grinch Who Stole Christmas,’ taking away our fun, kind of feeling. We might feel the same way when the church tells us to give away our possessions to those who are poor, or to love our enemies. Those are also countercultural values that we might find aggravating.

When I say that the church is countercultural, that doesn’t mean that the church is against everything in our culture. Some of you are old enough to remember when the church was against certain forms of music, and frowned upon dances; when the church acted as a kind of moral police: that’s not what I’m talking about here.

To say that the church is countercultural is to say that the

church asks us to think critically about the world around us, and not to just go along merrily with everything the world offers. From the very earliest days of the church, you see leaders like Paul helping new Christians to wrestle with the question of what does it mean to be a Christian and live in a particular culture?

Paul was dealing with people who were recent converts to Christianity, people who were used to the practices and habits of life in the Greco-Roman world. A world in which slavery was a norm; a world in which there were many, many gods, each of which was worshipped in a particular way, in particular temples, with particular rituals.

That was their whole framework, and when they became Christians, they had to sort out: which of their practices and habits they could continue doing as they had been; which of their practices and habits they would have to change in light of their Christian faith; and which they have to stop altogether, because they were incompatible with Christianity.

Paul’s guidance—in shorthand form—is essentially that Christians ought to apply their Christian outlook, the gospel, to everything in their world; they have to overlay everything with a Christian viewpoint, and let that be their guide. He’s inviting them to take this countercultural, critical stance.

So back to Advent and Christmas.

Following Paul's guidance, our task is to look at what is going on in the world around us—the world preparing for Christmas—to look at it from the perspective of our Christian story.

There are elements of our cultural practices that align well with the story the church tells: the *anticipation* and *longing* that accompanied a child's afternoon exploration of shiny catalogue pages—that's an echo of Advent. The *stillness* that settles upon the world when the snow falls in great swirling flakes—that's an echo of Advent, too. The cheer of carols, the warmth of baking, and their suggestion of a world made right, in which all are fed and sheltered and loved—that too is the very image of the Old Testament prophecy of a world of peace and brotherhood, a world in which war is no more.

At the same time, there are elements of our cultural practices of Christmas that our faith calls us to challenge and critique: for example, there is the commercialization of Christmas that turns it into an orgy of spending and consuming, that seems to begin earlier and earlier each year.

We spend more than we can afford on things that we don't really need. We eat too much, and we drink too much, in pursuit of good feelings, feeling happy. The good feelings never last as long as the extra pounds do, though.

In many ways, our cultural practices of Christmas just take all the things we do through the rest of the

year to make ourselves feel good, and then crank it up a couple of notches, as if doing more and more and more of the same will have a different result. And that's where the church steps in with Advent and says 'Hold on a minute there. You might want to try something else.'

Okay—so that's my very long introduction to the Gospel reading for today! So let's turn to the text that Brian read for us. The first thing to notice is that this is a countercultural text. It has that notion of anticipation that we talked about, but it's in a very different key. It's not the anticipation of what you will find under the tree on Christmas morning; it's the more alarming thought that perhaps your whole world will be turned upside down sometime between now and Christmas morning!

Rather than celebrating the return of predictable Christmas rituals and practices, rather than feeding our nostalgic longing that the Christmas to come should be the very best of what we remember of Christmases past—this passage foretells complete disruption and discontinuity: a future wholly unlike the past.

No wonder we don't like Advent! Especially at this time of the year! We want to cosy up by the fire, and this reading seems to send us out into the cold, icy blast of a blizzard.

It's that countercultural stance I keep talking about. God's not opposed to Christmas, of course. But God has something to say about how we spend

our Christmas, who we share it with, how we prepare for it, and just what it is we wait in anticipation for. God wants to push the boundaries of our Christmas celebration; God wants it to be like Christmas Day every day for us—the generosity and open-heartedness, the kindness and love that seem to come so naturally on that one day.

God uses Advent to help us prepare for that kind of Christmas, and that kind of life.

I want to close with a reflection on this Gospel reading that I read this week. These are the words of my teacher and friend, Will Willimon:

“Our time isn’t ours to spend as we please. In the advent of Jesus Christ, which we celebrate in this service, God has taken our time from us and made our time God’s time. In Jesus Christ, the world has ended. Everything we think has enduring value and to which we so ruthlessly cling—money, human potential, aspirations to run the world on our own, illusions that we can protect ourselves by ourselves—gets ripped away by that old thief of a God.

So as you leave this service, as you resume your daily grind, as you go about doing all those mundane things you do to get along in your life, keep looking over your shoulder. Keep listening for a knock on your heart’s door. Expect the

unexpected. God not only loves you, God knows your name, has your address, and in the most unlikely of times can show up and rock your world.”

May it be so this Advent. Amen.

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