Some years ago a Lutheran pastor sparked a great deal of passionate discussion with an article entitled “Let’s Move Advent.” Appealing to “all those weary of trying to defend Advent from the ravages of an ever-encroaching Christmas season,” Susan Wendorf declares that we are “only fooling ourselves by having Advent in Church during December while all around us the world is steeped in Christmas” (Wendorf, 25). She proposes three “Sundays of Christmas” before 25 December replete with carols, pageants, and manger scenes. Advent, she suggests, could more realistically be situated four weeks prior to this new December season, when there is at least a chance of celebrating a time of expectation and waiting. She exclaims:

Why not admit, finally, that our people really do go to Christmas parties four nights a week all during Advent where they—shudder!—actually sing Christmas carols, bake Christmas cookies, snitch stollen, buy and wrap (and sometimes even open) Christmas gifts, send and receive Christmas cards, listen to Christmas carols on the radio and play them on their CDs, watch Christmas specials on TV, put up and decorate Christmas trees—all in the three or four weeks before Christmas (25).

Wendorf’s observations that Christmas, for all intents and purposes, is a popular festival that happens before and up to December 25 still ring true today. While the environment committee seeks to create a minimalist atmosphere in the church, most folks pass the streams of tinsel and flashy lights as they come and go from Mass. While the music ministry does not budge beyond the Advent section in the hymnal, many parishioners creep ahead to a chorus of Hark, the Herald Angels at their office Christmas party in mid-December. While some liturgists dutifully point to December 17 as a transition to more immediate preparation for the feast of the Nativity, the daily count of shopping days left has more meaning for the average procrastinating parishioner. Given the barrage of red and green, the non-stop blinking of lights, the din of Christmas Muzak, should we give up on Advent, or should we, as Pastor Wendorf contemplates, change Advent? Or as Episcopalian liturgist J. Neil Alexander phrases the question, do we...
relieve or live into the tension of Advent? (Alexander, 24). I would like to suggest that we live into the tension of Advent. By this I mean that we should relinquish a notion of celebrating a “pure” Advent, and instead engage both our tradition and our present context so that we might live in both with integrity.

**Why Advent?**

The origin of the season of Advent in the Roman Church is not clear, but it comes relatively late in development of the liturgical cycle. First, December 25 had to come to be designated as the feast of the Nativity. Following one school of thought, this date was a Christian reaction to the establishment of the pagan feast of the Unconquerable Sun by the emperor Aurelian in 274 C.E. and its subsequent imperial support. The first solid evidence in Rome of December 25 as the feast of the Nativity comes from the *Chronograph*, a kind of Christian and secular almanac, allowing scholars to date the beginning of the feast around 336 C.E. Another school of thought, which has gained more proponents recently, posits that December 25 was chosen on the basis of a system of calculation. In some churches in the early Christian world, March 25 was determined to be the date of Jesus’ passion and death. These churches celebrated the Pasch as a unitive feast, one that celebrated the whole mystery of salvation in Christ—from conception and incarnation to resurrection and sending of the Spirit—on the occasion of his death. In this view, the day of Christ’s death was the day of his conception. Thus, a perfect nine months from March 25 became the day of Jesus’ birth, December 25. In this approach, the feast of the Nativity is intimately linked and ordered to the Pasch. The Byzantine liturgical tradition celebrates Christmas as a “winter Pascha.” As Nathan Mitchell puts it, “the Pascha of the Resurrection begins with the Pascha of the incarnation. . . . Easter is the optic through which all other Christian celebrations are seen and celebrated” (Mitchell, 535).

Once the Christmas feast was established, Advent, its season of preparation, could develop. The name advent comes from an originally pagan word that referred to the coming of a god to dwell in a temple. Our current season of four weeks is the result of a complex interaction of local Roman tradition and practices from north of the Alps. In Rome there was already the December seasonal celebration marking the end of the agricultural year with prayer, fast, and vigil. North of the Alps there was a six-week period of asceticism that may have served to prepare candidates for baptism at Epiphany. The gradual fusion of these two traditions eventually yielded a four-week Advent after Gregory the Great (d. 604). In the Middle Ages, Advent came to have a very somber and penitential character, accentuating the theme of judgment, the Day of Wrath. It is out of this ambiance that the third Sunday, whose opening antiphon began “Rejoice in the Lord (*Gaudete in Domino*)” (Phil 4:4), marked a reprieve in the somber mood. A remnant of this development is the option of Rose vestments on that Sunday.

The current *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* explain that Advent “has a two-fold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ’s first coming to us is remembered; [and] as a season when that remembrance directs mind and heart to await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation” (*GNLYC*, no. 39)—no longer a period of somber penitence. A key point of this passage is that we remember Christ’s first coming. The liturgical cycle is not play acting, as if we go back in history and
the excess of many American celebrations of Christmas in December as a celebration of nativity—“the birth of babies and good times, the growth and gathering of family and friends, gifts and crèches, excess and expectancy” (Mitchell, 540). Provocatively, he continues:

Perhaps our much-maligned consumerist culture has something to teach the more somber among us. For the sheer lavishness of Christmas display—unreasonable, embarrassing, effusive—is perhaps a raucous ritual metaphor (worldly indeed, but nevertheless real) of God’s quite unreasonable and lavish love for humankind. . . . Perhaps we believers should admit that, for all their kitschiness and cunning, culture’s holidays—with their ritual meals, noisy parties, and renewed attention to the needy—do a pretty good job of celebrating nativity (Mitchell, 540–41).

But, Mitchell urges, we need to celebrate incarnation even more. We need to point beyond the crèche to the Cross, to the crucified and risen One, who will come again. We announce the presence even as we feel the absence. We wait and watch even as we feast and welcome. Living into the tension between the values of the dominant culture and our liturgical tradition of Advent means we face head on the already and the not yet, the shadows and the light, the terror and the promise, the beginning and the end: “Living into and being animated by these Advent dynamics empowers our waiting and emboldens our witness to the Coming One” (Alexander, 26). We celebrate a Winter Pascha, where we celebrate the self-emptying of God and the victory over sin and death in Christ.
Incarnational Depth of Popular Religiosity

The celebration of the living and abiding presence-in-absence of God is affirmed in the rich popular religious expressions of Advent among particular ethnic groups. These are not historical pageants, but expressions of the tensions and fears, joys and hopes of day-to-day living in light of Jesus Christ who took flesh and pitched his tent among us. The expressions include enacting various kinds of processions like posadas, marking of the shortening days in the Northern hemisphere with the lighting of candles of advent wreaths, feasting Mary as Our Lady of Guadalupe and the saints like Lucy and Nicholas, keeping novenas like Simbang Gabi, and the building of a manger scene in home or workplace or church. These practices attend to the contingency of human life and birth, a deep and lived sense of the incarnational character of the Christian mystery, a mood of joy, a profound sense of hope and expectation, and concern for the poor. Attention to popular religiosity and to the culturally diverse ways of preparing for and celebrating Christmas show us that there is no one way of preparing, no one way of keeping Advent. There is a plurality of expressions of Advent and Christmas in our geographically, culturally, and economically diverse parishes.

God’s Interruptive Presence

A classic expression of the meaning of Advent can be found in a sermon of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153). It appears today in the Office of Readings for Wednesday of the First Week of Advent. Bernard speaks of the three comings of the Lord. Two are visible, one invisible. The first coming, he explains, is when Jesus was seen on earth, coming in the flesh. The third coming we await when Christ will come in glory and majesty. The middle coming, Bernard describes, is “in spirit and power,” each day of our life. It is “like a road we travel from the first coming to the last.”

This orderly, linear, progressive view of history as steadily moving from past to future has broken down for most of us today. The fragility of human life, the destructive power of human violence and aggression, and the voices from the margins of society that demand a hearing mark history more as discontinuous and fragmented, a series of little stories of the dominated rather than the sweeping stories of the dominators. As David Power explains, a linear reading of Advent liturgy “may indeed be the meaning given to this season and its texts by the Church in a given set of social and historical circumstances. One may not wish to see this as wrong, but one does not have to see it as necessary” (Power, 53). Rather, he suggests that the prayers and Scriptures “are more readily suggestive of God’s interruption of human history and of his unexpected interventions” (Power, 53). In this reading, Advent is not about moving ahead in steady progress, but being open and attentive to the in-breaking of God where and when we least expect God to be, the surprising ways God comes to us in our lives, so that we might be open to newness with confidence in the promises of God. This openness to the unexpected, Power says, conveys “an awareness of the living presence of God’s reign for those who keep the memory of Jesus Christ and who celebrate the mystery of his birth in midwinter” (Power, 52). Thus we need not parcel out Advent, now looking to the future and now celebrating the past, but allow its rhythms to prepare us for God’s advent in the ordinary.

As Taft asserts, “There is no ideal model of Christian feast or calendar which we must ‘discover’ and to which we must
‘return.’ Rather, it is up to each generation to . . . apply the mystery and meaning of Christ” in our own local situation (Taft, 23). This means reading seriously our context in light of the prodigal love of God, judging what authentically moves us to care for those who have not and what wrongly turns us in upon ourselves. Applying the mystery and meaning of Christ to Advent today also means taking seriously the intuitive expressions of faith manifested in popular religiosity. And finally, Advent entails being open to the unexpected, to God’s interruption of our human ways. So we can say, “Yes, our people really do go to Christmas parties” in Advent, while we open their eyes to the foretaste of glory and the embarrassing, homely love of God. Taking our cue from the variety of popular devotions, the answer is not to relieve the tension of Advent by turning it into an early Christmas season, but to live in its tensions and contradictions—which is, after all, what living the mystery of incarnation is all about.

References


