

Why Advent Matters  
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Advent Festival of Lessons and Carols

The word, “Advent,” is from the Latin for coming, or arrival. The origins of the season of Advent are obscure, scholars tell us. Something like what we know now – and what we Protestants came late to – started to take shape in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, and evolved over time. There is a loose parallel to Lent, of course, a season of preparation. Jesus is coming; Jesus is coming again. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker writes that “in Advent, therefore, are met the beginning and end of the story of human redemption.” (*Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*)

But it’s more than the history, Tish Harrison Warren writes that when the church marks Advent “...we find a countercultural sparseness. There’s a slowing down, a silent stillness. The music turns to minor keys and becomes contemplative, even mournful. The Scripture readings are apocalyptic and trippy.” (“Want to Get Into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2019)

“Why Advent Matters” could be better entitled “Why We Need Advent,” or “How Advent Matters.” I continue to be taken by our stewardship theme, which is a not-so-subtle stewardship thank you and reminder to those of you yet to pledge. The visual imagery of Vision 2020 is compelling.

Advent serves as a kind of pair of eyeglasses, inviting us to see, clearly, the world and all those in it. Like the right pair of glasses, properly prescribed and free of smudge marks, Advent is a window through which we see the present with precision and accuracy and truth. That is important, a view of the world, a view of our lives, free of distortion. If we move to Christmas too quickly, we would miss things in the blur. And a good window – big and clear, like our sanctuary windows – allows us to get a full view of the world Jesus is coming to redeem, especially those more distant corners that cry out for justice and reconciliation.

Advent is also a kind of mirror. We look in it to see a full and true reflection of ourselves. For followers of Jesus, it’s not so much whether we like what we see or don’t. It is, rather, how we accept ourselves as we are and then move ever more deeply into who God would intend us fully to be. Tish Harrison Warren writes that “Advent bids us first to pause and to look, with complete honesty,” at ourselves even as we contemplate the darkness of the

world. Advent invites us to a season of self-reflection and introspection, to step away in order to self-examine, that our journey to Bethlehem would be marked by integrity and authenticity.

Advent is a kind of watch crystal, or even an old school hourglass, through which we see time differently. In Advent, time slows down, an antidote to the frenetic pace of the Christmas season. And when we slow down, when we wait, anticipate, we notice things that will make all the difference. Paul Louis Metzger writes that “Advent is a time of waiting, it is a time of joy because the coming of Christ is not only a gift of grace and salvation but it is also a time of commitment because it motivates us to live the present as a time of responsibility and vigilance.” Such waiting is not passive, Metzger says. “We wait with urgent expectation.” (“Advent’s Prophecy Candle—Practice How to Wait Expectantly”)

And Advent is a kind of telescope, much more than a crystal ball, through which we might see the future. This is not fortune-telling, nor wishful thinking, but hope, based on the foundations of our faith, experienced this morning in word and music, including a powerful conversation between an angel and an unlikely young woman, hope that that invites us to imagine a different future, God’s future.

It can feel like circular conversation, except it’s more like an open-ended one, a journey. Advent matters because we need Advent, *and* we need Advent because it matters. It helps us to see with clarity and hope – ourselves, as we are and as we may be, and the world, in all of its brokenness and possibility. Without preparation, without this season of waiting, Christmas comes and goes, and we miss miracles big and small as Jesus comes to dwell among us.

Again, Tish Michael Warren writes that “To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime.”

Michael Gerson writes that in Advent, “Patient waiting is rewarded because the trajectory of history is tilted upward by a powerful hand...(t)he assurance at the heart of Advent is the antidote to fear. No matter how desperate the moment, we are told, time is on the side of hope.”

I am clinging to Gerson’s words this cold December morning, this Advent. He says: “This is the fullest expression of the hope of Advent — that all wrongs will finally

be righted, that all the scales will eventually balance and that no one will be exploited or afraid. It is like a seed in the cold earth. Like the first, barely detectable signs of a thaw. Like a child growing in a womb." ("Advent teaches us that hope is not a cruel joke," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2019)

We live in such hope, waiting, anticipating, preparing, in the darkness, in the cold, with yet imperfect vision, our sight illumined by a candle's flickering light, our path illumined by the guidance of a star. Amen.