

## *Introduction*

This volume of Advent sermons, writings, and other resources contains bold claims that may be new to some readers. Since the Advent season has been so closely linked to Christmas over the years, it may be startling to hear that Advent is not simply a transitional season but in and of itself communicates a message of immense, even ultimate, importance. [Of all the seasons of the church year, Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church, asks the most important ethical questions, presents the most accurate picture of the human condition, and above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again.] The material collected in this book is intended as witness to those claims.

The Advent season has always had a particular resonance for Episcopalians. We can be a bit snooty about it; our tradition of withholding the poinsettias, the crèche scenes, and the Christmas carols until Christmas Eve itself has been a point of pride for many of us. Ever since I was a very young child, this way of observing Christmas by delayed gratification has meant much to me, and I find it disappointing when “Christmas creep” intrudes upon Advent Sundays. As I have grown older, my love of Advent has deepened and broadened into a strong commitment to its particular theological and liturgical character. I have long wished to share my lifetime love of the season with Christian believers in other traditions, with the hope that I might contribute to a wider interest in the profound themes and emphases particular to Advent.

The season has long been important to Episcopalians, and to some extent to Lutherans and Moravians, but after the Reformation the churches in the Reformed tradition and most other Protestant denominations abandoned the church calendar altogether, except for Christmas and Easter; nor does the Roman Catholic Church pay as much attention to Advent nowadays as

one might expect, given its ancient roots.<sup>1</sup> Most of the numerous churches with no particular denominational allegiance broadly identified in America as “evangelical” have had little or no experience with Advent and its special character, and the same is true of the Pentecostal churches.

A few decades ago, however, a greater interest in the liturgical seasons began to develop among Methodists, Presbyterians, and others. This has enriched us all. There is a caution, however, lest enthusiastic new supporters of the calendar without deep roots in it will appropriate it without sufficient understanding, and this is true of Advent in particular; I have seen some curious examples in my visits to the Christian education wings of various churches where the pictures and fliers on the bulletin boards suggest that the season is another opportunity for playtime: “Advent is a red balloon!”<sup>2</sup>

The recent emergence of Advent wreaths and Advent calendars throughout churches of all denominations has had its own effect. I love them both; I give calendars to all the children in my life every year, and I brought up my own children with an Advent wreath. It must be said, however, that neither of these charming customs—which do not date back very far in church history—adds a great deal to our understanding of the season. There is a great deal of misinformation in circulation about the wreath custom. It is remarkable how frequently “ancient” (and even “pagan”!) origins are cited, without evidence, in support of such recent innovations.<sup>3</sup> A curiosity of our time is that we want to be progressive, forward-looking, unencumbered, even “emergent” in our liturgical observances, and yet we persist in harking back to “early” customs even when they are demonstrably not early at all. In fact, the Advent wreath originated in the middle of the nineteenth century as a custom in small Protestant communities in northern Germany.<sup>4</sup> It was unknown in the Episcopal

1. The liturgical observance of Advent in the Eastern Orthodox churches is not without its own importance, but lies beyond the scope of this project.

2. “Christmas creep” is beginning to infect even the Episcopal Church. William H. Petersen, the director of the Advent Project, reports being in an Episcopal parish for services on the First Sunday of Advent when the choir anthem was “Mary Had a Baby.” *The Living Church*, October 21, 2012.

3. Other notable examples found in the churches of today would be the widespread contemporary use of a “labyrinth” and the current enthusiasm for all things “Celtic.” The claims that have been made for these fashionable practices often do not stand up to serious historical investigation, and they tend to have a marked syncretistic or pantheistic character more in sync with the enthusiasms of the day than with biblical faith.

4. A Lutheran historian, Mary Jane Haemig, has written a brisk takedown of the relatively recent, romanticized mythology of the supposedly “ancient” custom of the Advent wreath: “The Origin and Spread of the Advent Wreath,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 332.

Church of my childhood, but it had become ubiquitous by 1970.<sup>5</sup> When the Advent wreath is used to distinguish Advent from Christmas, that is useful; but when it is taught and understood almost entirely as a way of preparing for Christmas, it loses any relationship to the eschatological, future-oriented nature of Advent that is the principal emphasis of this book.

### Advent as the Season of the Second Coming

The origins and development of the Advent season are less well understood than we might wish.<sup>6</sup> There were varying emphases and customs in differing parts of Christendom in the fourth and fifth centuries, leaving us with a mixed picture that continues today. It has been tempting for local churches in recent times to seize upon notions of Advent observance in the early centuries to support the idea that it has always been essentially a season of preparation for Christmas. However, there is evidence to show that as late as the fourth century, a December season of penitence and fasting had no clear relationship to Christmas, at least not in Rome.<sup>7</sup> By the seventh century, however, the Advent-Christmas connection was well established, and Advent has been observed as a penitential season, not unlike Lent, in preparation for Christmas up until the very recent past. Older Episcopalians who grew up in the '40s and '50s will still remember Advent as a “purple” season like Lent—although it must be said that the supposed “penitential” aspect left very little mark in actual practice!

For this volume, we can state that by the medieval period the essentially eschatological nature of the Advent season was fully established. Martin Luther, in particular, was remarkably attuned to the apocalyptic Advent language.<sup>8</sup> In the time of the Reformation, there was a marked departure from the

5. Advent wreaths are now habitually sold in nurseries and florist shops to Roman Catholic customers (and, increasingly, others as well), with a “pink” candle, even though few realize that it should be “rose” to denote *Gaudete* (rejoice!) Sunday, an observance of relief from fasting that no longer makes sense since the Roman Church has largely abandoned the penitential character of the season.

6. For those who wish to pursue this interesting but complex subject, the first chapter of J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* (Portland: Oregon Catholic Press, 1993), is an excellent introduction.

7. A series of sermons during the December fast in fourth-century Rome by Leo the Great do not mention Christmas at all.

8. One need look no further than the words of his hymn “Ein’ feste Burg” (“A mighty fortress”) to see this. “And though this world with devils filled / should threaten to undo

customary Advent preaching in the Roman Church. As one might expect, this was particularly noticeable among Lutherans, who, unlike the Reformed, continued to observe the church calendar but with a dramatically different focus. Whereas Roman Catholic preachers continued to exhort those attending Mass to double up on their penitential practices during Advent, Lutheran preachers focused on proclamation of the undeserved grace of God—evangelistic sermons rather than hortatory ones.<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther himself, in his typically earthy and worldly-wise way, poked fun at the Roman focus on preparation, saying Jesus might very well return while people were “drinking fine wines . . . and not praying a word.”<sup>10</sup> Paul the apostle might well approve of such an observation, for in his letter to the Galatians he exclaims, “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? . . . I am afraid I have labored over you in vain!” (3:2–3; 4:11).

Luther is still known for his grasp of the Advent scenario. However, his Pauline passion has faded among his heirs. The eschatological note of Advent, focusing on the second coming of Christ—the principal subject of this book—has been largely ignored even among the most enthusiastic Advent-lovers of late. However, with the transition to a new standard lectionary in the 1970s, now used in many denominations, the clear focus on the coming consummation of the kingdom of God in the day of the Lord has been recovered. Recovered, that is, among liturgists, trained musicians, and church historians—in actual practice, this recovery has occurred precisely at the time when the cultural Christmas craze has so overwhelmed the church’s ancient understanding of Advent, that nothing short of a full-court press could bring it back into the worship of the church. The dissonance between the culture and the church’s mission in the Advent season has been widely noted, but not until recently has heightened Advent observance been called upon as a countermeasure.

us, / we will not fear, for God has willed / his truth to triumph through us. / The Prince of Darkness grim, / we tremble not for him; / his rage we can endure, / for lo! His doom is sure: / One little Word shall fell him.”

9. Mary Jane Haemig, “Sixteenth-Century Preachers on Advent as a Season of Proclamation or Preparation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 125–52. “Implicitly or explicitly, Roman Catholic preachers emphasize what the season demands from their listeners rather than what the advent of Christ gives to them” (141). Put another way, they focused almost exclusively on human preparation, whereas most Lutherans followed Luther in proclaiming the justifying grace of God in coming to an *unprepared* world. I will not deny that the contents of this book favor the sixteenth-century Lutherans.

10. Quoted by Haemig, “Sixteenth-Century Preachers,” 126.

William H. Petersen, the founder of the Advent Project, has written, “While there is scant hope of changing the culture around us, the Church need not be a fellow traveler. The call is for the Church to reclaim for the sake of its own life and mission Advent’s focus on the reign of God and, in so doing, to hone once again the counter-cultural edge of the Gospel at the very beginning of the liturgical year.”<sup>11</sup>

And so, to understand the truly radical nature of Advent, it is necessary to get its relation to Christmas in perspective. In the medieval period, the Scripture readings for Advent were well established, and they were oriented only secondarily to the birth (first coming) of Christ; the primary emphasis was his second coming on the final day of the Lord. Because the church in modern times has turned away from the proclamation of the second coming, an intentional effort must be made to reinstate it. Related to the second coming, which Jesus repeatedly says will come by God’s decision at an hour we do not expect, is the Advent emphasis on the agency of God, as contrasted with the “works” of human beings. An exclusive emphasis on Advent as a season of preparation risks putting human endeavor in the spotlight for all four weeks of the season. All the Advent preparation in the world would not be enough unless God were favorably disposed to us in the first place. This will be a principal theme in many of the sermons collected here, which emphasize the theme of watching and waiting.

It would generally be agreed that Advent celebrates three “advents.” This version, from early Lutheran preaching, will serve as well as any:

*Adventus redemptionis*: the incarnate Christ “born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate”

*Adventus sanctificationis*: the presence of Christ in Word and sacrament

*Adventus glorificamus*: the coming in glory to be our judge on the last day<sup>12</sup>

All of this is part of the Advent message. However, what has been largely lost to us since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is the *primary* focus on the second coming of Christ, who will arrive in glory on the last day to consummate the kingdom of God. That is the special note of Advent—its orientation toward the promised future. The other seasons in the church calendar

11. *The Living Church*, October 21, 2012. The Advent Project online is highly recommended: <http://www.theadventproject.org/>.

12. Haemig, “Sixteenth-Century Preachers,” 135. To fit my own project, I have omitted one “advent” without, I think, doing harm to the concept of three.

follow the events in the *historical* life of Christ—his incarnation (Christmas), the manifestation to the gentiles (Epiphany), his ministry and preaching (the season after Epiphany), his path to crucifixion (Lent), his passion and death (Holy Week), the resurrection (Easter), the return to the Father's right hand (Ascension), and the descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost)—with Trinity Sunday to round it off doctrinally.<sup>13</sup> Advent, however, differs from the other seasons in that it looks *beyond history* altogether and awaits Jesus Christ's coming again “in glory to judge the living and the dead.”<sup>14</sup> In the cycle of 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.

The traditional Scripture readings for the Advent season have preserved this emphasis, but most clergy in the pulpits of the mainline denominations have employed many stratagems to avoid expounding them in their full provocation. The revised Book of Common Prayer presently used in the Episcopal Church contains the eucharistic acclamation “Christ will come again,” but this has not led to a noticeable increase in the preaching or teaching of this article of faith. During much of the twentieth century, the second coming of Christ was considered in the mainline churches to be an obsolete if not downright embarrassing topic for preaching, and the subject of the divine judgment that was so familiar to medieval and Reformation-era congregations fell into disfavor with the ascendancy of liberal theology. However, with the increasing interest in apocalyptic theology in the twenty-first century, the subject has increasingly been reopened and its central position in the New Testament reaffirmed by surprisingly sophisticated thinkers, if not by the rank and file of churchgoers.

Even more important, though, is the potential growth of appreciation for the special significance of the Advent season as a symbol of the church's life *in the present*. Here is another way of charting the trajectory of Advent, arguably the richest of the seasons because it celebrates three dimensions at once, embracing themes from the other highlights of the liturgical calendar. Note the order of the three, with the present last:

13. The churches of the Reformation are divided on the observance of the liturgical year. The Lutherans continued it, whereas the Reformed churches largely abandoned it. This pattern continues to this day; however, many Presbyterians, Methodists, and others have begun to return to the seasonal calendar, which affords a fresh opportunity to teach about the themes of Advent. One reason that Lutherans continued the tradition after the Reformation was that of catechesis; they believed that the progression of the church seasons made teaching the faith easier and more memorable, a factor that was certainly very important to me growing up (see Haemig, “Sixteenth-Century Preachers,” 131).

14. The Nicene Creed.

1. The past: God's *initiative* toward the world in Christ (Christmas)
2. The future: God's *coming victory* in Christ (second coming, or parousia, made present by the power of the Spirit at Pentecost)
3. The present: a *cruciform* (*cross-shaped*) life of love for the world in the present time (Epiphany, Lent, and Holy Week)

Karl Barth exclaimed, “What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent!”<sup>15</sup> This illuminates the *present* dimension of the season. It locates us correctly with relation to the first and second comings of Christ. Advent calls for a life lived on the edge, so to speak, all the time, shaped by the cross not only on Good Friday but wherever and whenever we are, proclaiming his death to be the turn of the ages “until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26). The gospel is incarnate in our lives in “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), not in a faraway empyrean but in “the sufferings of this present time,” which are endured (*hupomone*) because of the promise that they “are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

This more rigorous understanding of the church's location can be embraced without reserve today in the Northern Hemisphere as the church becomes less comfortable, less “established,” and more marginalized in a society full of “nones.” In that respect, as is increasingly being recognized, the life of the Christian community will come to resemble that of the early church rather than the boom years of the last midcentury.

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in the time between the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead. In the Time Between, “our lives are hidden with Christ in God; when Christ who is our life appears, then we also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4). Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our faith requires. Many of the sermons in this book will explore this theme in relation to the yearly frenzy of “holiday” time in which the commercial Christmas music insists that “it’s the most wonderful time of the year” and Starbucks invites everyone to “feel the merry.” The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.

15. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 322.

W. H. Auden's work is prominent in many of these sermons. His long poem *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* has been beloved by Christians throughout the English-speaking world since the 1950s. Written in the dark early days of World War II, it has not been cherished by secular readers as much as his undeniably Olympian prewar poetry, but for many discerning Christians it would rank among the great poetical works of the twentieth century. It embraces liturgical time from Advent to the Epiphany, but one can argue that it is actually an *Advent* oratorio because it not only begins with an extended Advent section but also ends with the return to "the time being."<sup>16</sup> The title, *For the Time Being*, is profoundly suitable for the Advent season, as is the phrase I will be using, "the time between." The Lord has come, the Lord will come. The subtitle of this present volume is *The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, the intent being to capture the dual nature of Advent's location in human and universal history. Auden is a supreme poet of the Advent atmosphere in his more secular work as well. In his celebrated poem written at the outset of World War II, "September 1, 1939," he captures the universal human tendency to cover up our unease and estrangement with sentimentality and denial. The poet knows better:

Faces along the bar  
 Cling to their average day:  
 The lights must never go out,  
 The music must always play.  
 All the conventions conspire  
 To make this fort assume  
 The furniture of home;  
 Lest we should see where we are,  
 Lost in a haunted wood,  
 Children afraid of the night  
 Who have never been happy or good.<sup>17</sup>

16. The long poem was originally intended to be the libretto for a musical composition analogous to the oratorios of G. F. Handel. Auden intended the composer to be Benjamin Britten, but that never came to pass. Several composers have tried their hand, but none of their efforts have stuck. Carl Bricken, resident professor of music at my college, Sweet Briar in Virginia, set the whole thing to music, and it was spectacularly produced and performed at the college in 1958, but unfortunately was thereafter lost to posterity as far as I have been able to find out. Bricken's biography in the *Dictionary of American Classical Composers* does not mention it.

17. W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 57.

Auden identifies our defenses as a "fort" that we have made as comfortable as possible in order to fend off our fears. The Advent season encourages us to resist denial and face our situation as it really is.

### Looking into the "Heart of Darkness"

It might be said of Advent that it is not for the faint of heart. To grasp the depth of the human predicament, one has to be willing to enter into the very worst. This is not the same thing as going to horror films, which are essentially entertainment. Entering into the very worst means giving serious consideration to the most hopeless situations: for instance, a facility for the most profound cases of developmental disability. What hope is there for a ward full of people who will never sit up, walk, speak, or feed themselves? Tourists go to the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau and take pictures, but who can really imagine the smells and sounds of the most deprived of all situations? The tourist can turn away in relief and go to lunch.

Some of the greatest novelists have attempted to portray the very worst. It was Joseph Conrad who gave us the phrase and the novella *Heart of Darkness*—which in turn gave T. S. Eliot the epigraph for his profoundly pessimistic, even hellish preconversion poem "The Hollow Men."<sup>18</sup> The esteemed writer Cormac McCarthy has always written about the darker side of life in gorgeous biblical language, but his masterpiece *Blood Meridian* is the one that presents the greatest challenge for the reader.<sup>19</sup> It is a very long novel, mesmerizing in its power, containing not a single hint of redemption. A narrative about a gang of bounty hunters in the Southwest, based on an actual historical gang, it is pure madness and evil from beginning to end. Eliot's lines in "Hollow Men" well describe the landscape in *Blood Meridian*:

18. T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1952), 55–59. The epigraph is "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." It is the ignominious epitaph for the central figure who represents humanity in the grip of demonic impulses. (I have considered, but do not agree with the postcolonial objection to Conrad's representation of Africa as the heart of darkness. It is a universal parable about the grip of Sin and Death.)

19. The word "apocalypse" used in this way (as in *Apocalypse Now*) does not mean the same thing as "apocalyptic" when used to denote a type of literature or a theological position. The Greek word *apokalypsis*, meaning "revelation," refers to the utterly new thing that comes into being with the future advent of God and the new creation. "Apocalypse," taken from the same biblical root, refers to a much simpler multipurpose notion, that of a cataclysmic event that threatens our understanding or control of the world.