



continuous conversion

ADVENT: SEASON OF ANTICIPATION & HOPE

by Sara Tusek

In liturgical churches, the four weeks leading up to Christmas comprise the Advent season. This newsletter quotes material from Dennis Bratcher, who writes about Advent at <http://www.cresourcei.org/cyadvent.html>

The meaning of Advent

The word **Advent** means "coming" or "arrival."

The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Thus, Advent is far more than simply marking a 2,000 year old event in history. It is celebrating a truth about God, the revelation of God in Christ whereby all of creation might be reconciled to God.

Scripture reading for Advent reflects this emphasis on the Second Advent, including themes of accountability for faithfulness at His coming, judgment on sin, and the hope of eternal life.

In this double focus on past and future, Advent also symbolizes the spiritual journey of individuals and a congregation, as they affirm that Christ has come, that He is present in the world today, and that He will come again in power.

That acknowledgment provides a basis for Kingdom ethics, for holy living arising from a profound sense that we live "between the times" and are called to be faithful stewards of what is entrusted to us as God's people.

So, as the church celebrates God's inbreaking into his-

tory in the Incarnation, and anticipates a future consummation to that history for which "all creation is groaning awaiting its redemption," it also confesses its own responsibility as a people commissioned to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and to "love your neighbor as yourself."



Advent is the beginning of the Church Year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown.

The Spirit of Advent

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing.

There is a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out from their bitter oppression.

It is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet who have hope of deliverance by a God who has heard the cries of oppressed slaves and brought deliverance!

It is that hope, however faint at times, and that God, however distant He sometimes seems, which brings to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth and justice and righteousness over His people and in His creation.

It is that hope that once anticipated, and now anticipates anew, the reign of an Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace and justice and righteousness to the world.

The spirit of Advent (cont.)

Part of the expectation also anticipates a judgment on sin and a calling of the world to accountability before God. We long for God to come and set the world right!

Yet, as the prophet Amos warned, the expectation of a coming judgment at the "Day of the Lord" may not be the day of light that we might want, because the penetrating light of God's judgment on sin will shine just as brightly on God's people.

Because of this important truth, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Season of Advent has been a time of fasting and penitence for sins similar to the Season of Lent.

However, a different emphasis for the season of Advent has gradually unfolded in much of the rest of the church.

Hope of justice for all

The season of Advent has come to be celebrated more in terms of expectation or anticipation. Yet, the anticipation of the Coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament and Judaism was not in connection with remembrance of sins. Rather, it was in the context of oppression and injustice, the longing for redemption, not from personal guilt and sin but from the systemic evil of the world expressed in evil empires and tyrants.

It is in that sense that all creation groans for its redemption as we witness the evil that so dominates our world (Rom 8:18-25).

Of course, there is the problem of longing for vindication from an evil world when we are contributors to that evil. This is the power of the images of Amos when he warns about longing for the "Day of the Lord" that will really be a day of darkness (Amos 5:18-20). Even with Amos' warning the time of Advent is one of expectation and anticipation, a longing for God's actions to restore all things and vindicate the righteous.

This is why during Advent we as Christians also anticipate the Second Coming as a twin theme of the season. So, while some church traditions focus on penitence during Advent, and there remains a place for that, the spirit of that expectation from the Old Testament is better captured with a joyous sense of expectancy. Rather than a time of mourning and fasting, Advent is celebrated as a time of joy and happiness as we await the coming of the King.

Celebrate His advent!

So, we celebrate with gladness the great promise in the Advent, yet knowing that there is also a somber tone as the theme of threat is added to the theme of promise. This is reflected in some of the Scripture readings for Advent, in which there is a strong prophetic tone of accountability and judgment on sin. But this is also faithful to the role of the Coming King who comes to rule, save, and judge the world.

Because of the dual themes of threat and promise, Advent is a time of preparation that is marked by prayer. While Lent is characterized by fasting and a spirit of penitence, Advent's prayers are prayers of humble devotion and commitment, prayers of submission, prayers for deliverance, prayers from those walking in darkness who are awaiting and anticipating a great light (Isa 9)!

The spirit of Advent is expressed well in the parable of the bridesmaids who are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1-13). There is profound joy at the Bridegroom's expected coming. And yet a warning of the need for preparation echoes through the parable. But even then, the prayer of Advent is still:

**Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel!**

