

# What was I thinking?

November 28, 2021



## Advent

Here we are again, back at what we call the beginning of the church's liturgical calendar. The liturgical year begins with the season of Advent. It's one of my favorite seasons, though it can be a confusing time. The world outside the church, driven by commercial retail, has been busy telling us it's Christmas since before Halloween. But, if we really observe the church year, Christmas doesn't begin until December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Day. The season lasts, as the song tells us, for twelve days, December 25-January 5, then we reach Epiphany on January 6.

Advent is about preparing and waiting. We're not good at that, and I think we're getting worse as time goes by, but I think we've been forced to improve that discipline for almost two years now. We seem to have less patience now than ever before, and I include myself in that. Without leaving our house, we can order things online, and if we're anxious enough, we'll pay extra for overnight delivery, and what we ordered is at our front door the next day. Even more convenient, we can order and download things in a manner of seconds. We don't have to wait for CDs to come so we can listen or books to come so we can read, we just download them on iTunes or Kindle and we instantly have them. That's even true in the world of choral music. If we need a new anthem for the choir, or if I get an e-mail telling me there's a new anthem and we just HAVE to have for our choir to sing this year, I can pay for it online, download it, and we can print our own copies. That convenience is nice, and I guess it does save on the materials of making some of those things. But I have to say I think we're pretty spoiled. I know I am.

However, I think we've been humbled lately, at least when it comes to material goods and supplies. You can't download toilet paper. We've gone in grocery stores and seen empty shelves, and not just toilet paper. The cat food isn't there, the milk isn't there, there are supply chain disruptions all over. How can this be? This is 2021! The stores should be able to have their shelves stocked overnight. We're learning a hard lesson about patience.

I remember an Episcopal priest explaining the many meanings of Advent. She said Advent is about preparing for our annual celebration of the birth of Christ, but Advent is also, at least in some traditions, about preparing for the Second Coming. The Episcopalians aren't any more comfortable than the Presbyterians about discussing that. What does it mean? Will there be some rapture when we'll all be taken up into heaven? (Or depending on who you ask, only some of us being taken up.) Is that going to be a one-time big event, one that could happen at any time and we need to be prepared? Or, as this priest put it, is it what happens when we die? Is that when Christ comes again, when the trumpet sounds, when the dead are raised? If that's true it happens at different times, and it happens all the time. Maybe God's concept of time is different.

One of the things about going through our liturgical calendar is that we tell our story, over and over, year after year, but hopefully we learn something from that. Christmas is about celebrating Emmanuel, God with us. We can welcome God into our lives at any time, but Christmas can be a reminder to intentionally let God into our lives, maybe in a new and better way. If that's true, then Advent can be our time of preparing for that. Is there any business we need to take care of so we're ready for God? Any messes we need to clean up? Any relationships that might need mending? Anything we can do to make ourselves better? Any forgiveness we need to ask for or offer? If so, that's what Advent can be about. The season can be a reminder to consciously take a look at our lives, to look in the mirror and to look inside at our spiritual selves. I'm sure we will all find things we could make better. Maybe we need to start by forgiving ourselves for things.

We need to keep hearing and telling our story, and not just the good parts, though it's tempting to dwell on those as a means of escape from our sometimes difficult world. We need tell and retell the whole story. I remember one Montreat Worship and Music conference that had as its theme the liturgical year. In it we were reminded that we need to keep telling our story, over and over, as we always have. We might ask why we need to repeat the same things every year when we already know how the story goes, but even though we read the same scriptures and sing the same hymns and carols, we're not the same as were the last time we heard them, so they are heard with "new ears."

I think it's safe to say that for almost two years now, we've all been waiting. Waiting in darkness for the light to come. Waiting and mourning in lonely exile for the Son of God to appear. On the first Sunday of Advent, we will sing: "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee." We will sing: "Comfort those who sit in darkness bowed beneath oppression's load."



It's easy to lose ourselves in the warm and joyous music, sounds, smells, and sights of Christmas, but I think it's good to remember why Christmas is really important, to remember what it is we're waiting for. The season of Advent in our church year is a time to prepare for Christmas. But what about those we read about in scriptures waiting for the birth, the coming of a Messiah? They didn't have a wreath with four candles. They didn't know how long they would be waiting and what, when, where, and how this birth might turn out. They didn't even know for sure if it would happen. They waited a lot longer than four weeks and they didn't know if there would be a happy ending. They just waited and hoped.

So, it's not just about waiting for Christmas. If Christmas is about God coming to dwell with us, be among us, then maybe we need to prepare ourselves spiritually for what that could mean. It could be an annual opportunity to intentionally welcome God into our lives and make a fresh start. I think we all have some work to do.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and

stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live there himself. (C.S. Lewis)

O come, O come, Emmanuel.

God be with you till we meet again.

John