

The Season of Advent Is Purgative...and That Is a Good Thing

Here he goes again..." You sit in the pew and listen to the pastor talk about this thing called "Advent." Every year he bangs this drum! You politely feign attention to his repetitive point—Advent is four weeks, and *then* comes Christmas. "This guy is like a broken record. Every year...Advent...blah, blah, blah. No one likes Advent; no one celebrates Advent. It's Christmas time! And I'm ready. Besides, it's my favorite time of the year, and I want to indulge in all my favorite songs, and cookies, and sweaters, and *my* traditions! So, no...I won't be doing Advent this year...or ever."

(On or around December 26) "I am so sick of Christmas. If I have to hear 'Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer' one more time...I'm going to scream! Get this tree out of here! Time to clean it up. Christmas isn't like it used to be. Too commercial. I'm ready for it to be over."

You feel the pull. You see the first lights go up on your street. Yeah, it's before Thanksgiving, but so what! Christmas is a busy season and you have a lot to do. You have also heard your pastor, and others like him, advocate for following the Church Year. It sounds good in theory...but the sales start, Black Friday happens, people are coming in for the holidays, you have parties, and decorating, and shopping, and baking, and the Christmas cards! I have to get out the Christmas cards before anyone opens a single present! People will think I'm behind. So, you go along with the world—and by world I mean the marketing forces arrayed against you with its consumeristic demands—and along with everyone else. You might intend to go to a couple of the midweek Advent services this year, but if it's too dark and the weather's not great...I've got things to do.

If you relate to any of this, I'm here to help. Not to scold, but catechize. To teach and encourage you. If you're reading this, you are either a member of this congregation, or affiliated with someone who is. The pastor's job is to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." (2 Tim 4:2) So, I seek to rebuke (so, yeah scold) but also to encourage. There is a more excellent way. You don't have to do everything the pagans do. You don't have to follow other Christians, who are less-than-faithful to the historic and ancient practices of the Church. You can actually follow an order, a pattern, a liturgical rationale for how we celebrate and when. You can do it. You can choose to do it...because it is good for your spiritual life of faith and your external witness to the world.

The Season of Advent: What Is It and Why?

You can use Wikipedia, so I won't copy and paste the article on Advent here. I instead will give you the theological importance of Advent, as seen in the Historic Lectionary. Advent comes from *adventus*, which is Latin for "coming." In Advent, we anticipate *the coming of the Lord Jesus* in final judgment, to restore all things, to inaugurate the wedding feast without end, to raise both the just and the unjust. As well, Advent prepares us to commemorate the first coming of

Jesus, the incarnation of the eternal Son into the flesh, born of a virgin “in the bleak midwinter.” So, there is a natural connection between Advent and the Nativity of Our Lord. Anticipation is an apt word capturing the “posture” of Advent—anticipating the feast of Christmas and the final feast to come.

When we observe the lectionary readings for Advent, we see these anticipatory themes interwoven. The First Sunday in Advent has as its Gospel Matthew 21:1-9 and Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This accents the first coming of Jesus as King, but One Who would “ride on to die.” The Second Sunday is Luke 21:25-36 which is part of Jesus’ eschatological teaching of the “coming of the Son of Man.” This text speaks of Jesus coming with signs and wonders, with power and great glory. Clearly accenting the second advent. The Third Sunday takes us to John the Baptist, languishing in prison, and asking Jesus: are you the one who is to come or shall we expect another? This focuses on elements of both advents, for Jesus responds that He is, but the coming is not yet in full. The Kingdom has come in the very person and work of Jesus but there is more comfort on the horizon. Finally, the Fourth Sunday gives an option of two—John 1:19-28 and Luke 1:39-56. We are doing Luke this year, which is the coming of pregnant Mary to Judea to visit relative Elizabeth, who is also expecting the coming of John. This most directly links us to the season of Christmas, but not without a nod to final, end-times judgment. The Magnificat brilliantly echoes the eschatological promises made throughout the Old Testament, inaugurated in the Christ child, but also anticipating the Day of the Lord. Advent, then, based on the readings the Church has used for centuries, has an anticipatory character, anchoring God’s people in the promises of both advents that now reside in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Purging, Abstaining, and Synching Up

This then leads us to better consider why Advent is not simply a “run-up to Christmas,” and why treating Advent this way actually undercuts that triumphant festival. Advent has a decidedly different posture and attitude than Christmas, and this is for our good. The season of Advent has always been a season of “purging.” It is a season of preparing for the coming of Jesus through the practices of fasting, praying, and meditating on God’s Word. But how might one do this in a world saturated with parties and indulgence? How can a Christian synch up with Advent when the whole world is telling you it’s “Christmas time”?

More on that below. First, take a moment to consider what it is to purge. Purge what? Excesses. Excess food, excess parties, excess merry-making. Excess shopping. Uh-oh. “Do you mean that we don’t shop during Advent?” No...again, more on that below. But need we lose our minds? Need we run around with no restraint and do everything everyone else does? How would your neighbors know you’re a Christian at all? Certainly through your witness. But your witness is way more than words. It is the way you conduct yourself, and live in synch with another calendar, another time horizon, another set of standards. Part of this is to purge out excesses, all while preparing quietly, soberly, for the feast to come. Advent is a season of purging.

This might mean you say, “No.” *No* to doing every single thing the world asks of you. *No* to going so hard, so fast, that by Christmas you’ve got nothing left. *No* to the endless disruptions in your life of preparing for Jesus. *No* is a complete sentence, and a necessary part of a season of purging, abstaining, and getting ready. The simple, ancient practice of abstaining from singing the *Gloria in Excelsis* for the season captures this perfectly. We are not denying the confession of it, or its proper place in the liturgy. We are simply leaving off with it for a time, anticipating the Nativity of the Lord Eve, when it comes back in full force. No is more like *not yet*. Wait for it.

Letting the Seasons Have Their Time

If we broaden things out a bit, we see that the purgative character of Advent isn’t unique in the Church Year. There are other seasons of fasting and feasting, of refraining and rejoicing. In fact, we know of a dynamic pairing in the Spring—Lent. In the season of Lent, we have a penitential season of purging, abstaining, and deeper meditation. We lay aside not only the Gloria, but also the Alleluia for a time. Lent is also a season of preparation...anticipating the Resurrection of Our Lord and the festival of Easter. We prepare for the feast by having a time of purgation. We enjoy our feast because we have prepared with a fast.

But allow me to make a basic human argument: what if every day was Christmas? Seriously? What if you listened to Christmas music 24/7? Undoubtably, you know people who have done this, or attempted to. The house that keeps their lights up all year. The Christmas tree that is ever present. But imagine if every single day is a festival? If you are honest, you know it’s not natural. We aren’t created for such living. And it’s not simply because it’s “too much of a good thing.” We all know that everything needs its place, its proper time, its season. And when we violate this basic creational dynamic—fasting then feasting—we invite things in such as gluttony, drunkenness, and a basic lack of self-control.

I listen to a daily podcast, where the host is very up front with his seasonal loves. He loves Christmas; wants it as early as possible (he’s an evangelical who doesn’t necessarily follow the Church Year). He also loves “pumpkin spice.” Cakes, candies, drinks...you name it. He can’t get enough of it. He looks forward every year to when stores and brands have their pumpkin spice roll-out. Last year, though, he decided he was going to stock up. He bought a store out of a particular cereal brand with pumpkin spice flavor. “This is going to be great!” he thought. “I’ve beat the retail system.” So, he ate his cereal most every day...until February. “I thought it was going to be great. Turned out...not so much.” Every season has their contribution. Every season has their own character. It’s best when we let each season have their time, their say and we synch up with what’s to be gained from it. This is especially true for the Church Year. When we truncate, ignore, or coopt a season in the Church, we miss out on so much. And we don’t really let the other season have its own time too.

Best Practices Amidst an Increasingly Vapid Culture

So, what am I arguing? That there's no Christmas trees in our homes until December 24? That we don't prepare for Christmas at all? That we don't take advantage of great deals we see in early October? No...though, when I was a kid, trees didn't go up until a few days before. But what I am advocating is that *we let Advent have its say, and even influence the choices we make.* It is a season of preparation, yes, but not at all in the "preparing for Christmas" way. Advent prepares us to commemorate the first coming of the incarnate Lord Jesus, and urges us to be prepared for His imminent return. So, what if we still got ready for our Christmas obligations, but showed some restraint with respect to the commercial aspects? What if we said "no" or "not yet" to some of the more vapid aspects of "cultural Christmas," and instead actually engaged in Advent? What if we used the season to make us more faithful and draw closer to Christ?

Below, I offer some suggestions of what this might look like in a devotional life. These will not be crafty or home-based suggestions, as I am neither the queen of my home nor female. But these are "Advent attitudes" and postures that spill over to when certain things might be done and how personally you can use a season of purgation to prepare yourself for the coming of Jesus and all the festal seasons the Church Year observes.

Learn to Give Things Up...for a Season

We live in a society when everything is on demand, shipped to our front door, instantly accessible. This has created an expectation that we should not only get what we want, when we want it, but *that we should never do without.* Anything. This is not good for us. Perhaps, then, you can start with learning to "do without" for a short time. Pick your most vulnerable food (=the thing you won't stop eating ever) and give it up. Abstain from a form of technology for a season. Stay off your phone from 6am-noon. Practicing doing without.

This is called abstaining or fasting. Technically, fasting is giving up food or drink for a certain amount of time. Abstaining is doing without something for a time. Both are good for you. Jesus says, "When you fast..." seeing it as an expectation for the Christian life. So, you can abstain from sugar/sweets for a season, or fast certain times of the day. In either case, you are training your body to "do without." This helps you focus on a) the gifts God gives b) preparing for the feast and c) finding time for other pious pursuits. Advent is the perfect season to try to give something up. Try this—for any service where you will have the Eucharist, fast from the prior meal. If you are having communion Sunday morning, skip breakfast!

Set Up in Stages for Christmas

Another way to embrace Advent and its purgative character is to set up for Christmas in stages. I'm not getting into home décor...but perhaps you delay a week or two from getting your tree. Or putting it up. What if you wait another week to decorate it? Put the lights up first and leave it at that. We all have our micro-traditions, but the worthy goal of engaging in the Church Year might mean we make a few adjustments. Maybe we don't watch all the Christmas movies in our

collection by December 8. Maybe we don't put on Charlie Brown's Christmas album until the week before the holiday. Maybe we don't bake Christmas cookies until two days before Christmas. Maybe you actually develop Advent rituals. An Advent wreath anyone? It's a thing. How about Bach's Advent Cantatas? There are four of them. And they are awesome.

This means that some of the activities you burn through in late November and December can be reserved for the Twelve Days of Christmas (yes, it's like the song). Set apart special activities for that season. Perhaps watch *It's a Wonderful Life* on the fifth day of Christmas. Leave that tree up until Epiphany. Soon, you'll be in synch with the Church Year!

Always Look for the Biblical Jesus in All You Do

I hate to tell you this...Cousin Eddie has nothing to do with Christmas. Dumb sweaters have nothing to do with Christmas. Mariah Carey is vapid and should be avoided at all costs. Analyze all of the things that "you can't do without" during Christmas and ask yourself, "Where is Jesus in all of this?" Some of the modern American Christmas music of the 20th century has Christ in it. But a lot of it doesn't. So, find the Christ child in your lead up to celebrating His birth.

Here is something additive you can do in preparing for Christmas during Advent. Set aside five minutes a day. Maybe you do this with the family or as a personal devotion. Read Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38; John 1:1-17, Luke 1:39-56, Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-21, and Matthew 2:1-15, one each day, on a weekly loop, for the four weeks of Advent. What better way to synch up with the season? Better yet, read them out loud to your family. Let the older children read. Let Grandma read. Wait...let Dad read. Now we are getting crazy.

I am quite serious about this. Take stock of everything "Christmasy" in your orbit. Look for Jesus. If he's not there explicitly, get rid of it. Seriously. And this is during the season of Advent. Before you can begin to do Advent, you need a thorough Christian inventory of your habits and rituals that you do during the "holidays." *Die Hard* is decidedly NOT a Christmas film. Stop arguing about this. Jesus is Lord.

Find the Rhythm of the Church Year, Weekly Worship, and Daily Devotion to Christ

I admit this meditation is quite snarky, because I am trying to penetrate your defenses. I believe it's important that in our vapid culture, full of superficial, gross banalities...we actually act like Christians. Part of that is the witness we give to the world about *when* we do things, as well as what we do. Celebrating Advent is a way that we are different from everyone else. We used to live in society that at least nominally believed in Jesus. That's no longer the case. So, we need to be intentional with how we give witness. Our faith is not just some private matter. You are a disciple of Jesus. Not private.

One objection might be that some of the seasons of the Church Year "aren't in the Bible." That's not true. The English word "advent" is not in the Bible, but its biblical themes certainly are.

Besides, God established liturgical seasons and months and days for His people to follow. Ever heard of Passover, and the Feast of Weeks, and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and the Feast of the Booths? Have you ever heard of the Sabbath? How about all the ceremonies and rituals revolving around the Temple? Well...Jesus, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. He is the Temple made without hands. He is the fulfillment of the Law. But what Jesus didn't do is obliterate fasts and feasts—*He transformed the old ones that pointed to Him into new ones centered on Him*. The entire Church Year, including Advent, is focused on following Jesus. The early Church began adopting feast days and periods of fasting to serve the people, that they might know more about Jesus and would be more deeply devoted to Him. What if we did the same? What if we stopped letting the world take the lead, and started to find the rhythm of the liturgical calendar? Who knows, we might learn a thing or two, and become more faithful Christ followers. Then, people would know us by our fruits, and our fasts, and our seasons.