

Advent as a Penitential Season

Over time Christianity developed what is known as the Christian Calendar or the Church Year. It is presented in its objective form as a chronological calendar comprised of seasons, with festivals occurring in each season. The seasons and festivals are celebrated in the worship life of most Christian churches. There is also a subjective form of this calendar. In its subjective form, the seasons and festivals of the calendar depict the work God does as Christ in our individual interior lives to bring us the fullness of our particular human life. Subjectively, each season is a period of time in which a particular aspect of this work occurs. Usually the subjective experience of a season does not coincide with its appearance in the objective calendar; that is, we rarely experience a season when it is celebrated in worship. The seasons are arranged sequentially, providing in essence a guide or map to the experiences through which we will be taken as Christ helps us recover from the excesses and imbalances in which we habitually live. The seasons describe in some detail the kind of internal events by which Christ makes us more conscious and aware of the many feelings, thoughts, conflicts, hopes, fears, etc. that are constantly moving in our hearts and minds. Through this work Christ pulls into our awareness things about ourselves we tend to ignore and dismiss. The aspects of our life that emerge in our awareness clash with our established identity. Through this clash our experience of ourselves changes, so that what we have too much of diminishes, and what we have too little of increases.

This work begins with the creation of a “space” in our hearts into which something new may come to life. The creation of this space is what is highlighted in the season or time of Advent. Advent is a “penitential” time. The word penitential means experiencing remorse or regret for having missed the mark. The word penitential describes the way life will feel at certain times as God works in us. The need is to legitimize those times when this feeling comes to us. Legitimizing this is not easy because for centuries we have been too judgmental around the experience of missing the mark. In our minds, to miss the mark is a fatal flaw, a defect for which we are criticized and censured. It has become something we do not want to know or admit because it indicates we are “bad.” However, missing the mark is not about being bad; it is about being human. And, in reality, the awareness that one has missed the mark is a great gift of grace. It marks the arrival of the awareness that something is not right, or not as it might have been, or might be, or needs to be. The appearance of this awareness indicates that we are no longer able to remain within the confines of life as usual or life as inherited. Realizing we have missed the mark will open us to life being different.

Feeling remorse or regret for missing the mark is not a pleasant experience, and its being unpleasant is a necessity since if it were pleasant we would absorb it and life would go on as usual. But this is an experience that is difficult to abide for

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any period of time, and its being difficult motivates us to do something to remove it from our life. Remorse and regret will either push or pull us to do whatever is necessary to hit the mark and remove the experience of missing the mark.

Sometimes this awareness that we have missed the mark, plus the efforts we make to hit the mark, are all that is necessary for our lives to become better balanced.

Later, the same grace that made us aware the first time will come again with another awareness that we have missed the mark, and the effort to hit the mark will begin again. Throughout our lives God will initiate this process as we are taken toward the fullness of our own life. What we are describing is celebrated and validated during the first two weeks of Advent

Sometimes, however, our efforts to hit the mark do not succeed. We find that the awareness that we have missed the mark is not successfully addressed by what we do. In this case, the season of Advent deepens and takes us on a more extended journey. After a while we will realize that we are unable to hit the mark for reasons that are a mystery to us. We will eventually come to a place of acquiescing to the reality that we are not able to make things different. Just as the first awareness that we are missing the mark was a gift of grace, so also this second awareness, that we are not able to find the mark and make missing the mark go away, is a gift of grace. It allows us to surrender to and wait in a longing for things to change, even though we cannot conceive of how that change will look. These events are what is celebrated and validated in the third and fourth weeks of Advent. This Advent journey is not resolved until the season or time of Christmas, when there comes to life in us the experience of being accepted with our life being just the way it is, feeling unacceptable and all.

The remaining seasons of the Church Year describe what Christ does to take what has come to our awareness in Advent and integrate it into our definition of who we are so that it changes the way we live.

Two things make the penitential time of Advent possible: the understanding that the insights that come during this time are a sign of God's grace, and the belief that through these experiences our life will come out in a different place. An additional quality makes it feasible: a willingness to approach the penitential feelings of remorse and regret as legitimate and worthy of attention.

[Jim Robie, 11-29-12]