# THE FIRST CYCLE OF THE CHURCH YEAR
## Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Ordinary Time Following Epiphany

**Introduction:** From its beginning the Christian Church has presented its message using a mythological paradigm. In mythology a story is presented in the form of historical narrative. So in the seasons of Advent and Christmas we are presented with stories about the Son of Man, John the Baptist, shepherds, angels, kings, Mary and Joseph, a baby, and others. What we need to know is that when these stories originated the distinction between what we call the subjective/internal world and the objective/external world was only emerging and barely existent. In the ancient thought-world the words used in the telling of these stories would have had both an internal and an external reference, although the speaker would not have known that since the subjective and objective worlds were essentially the same. This was not an issue for the writer/speaker, but it is an issue for us, the reader. We do not read these stories the way the writer wrote them. For us, the subjective and objective worlds are more separated and we tend to read the stories the way they are presented, as being concerned with the objective world and history; and, we do not tend to hear them as having an internal reference. Even though in their telling they are about external events happening outside us, when we hear them we need to remember that they are conveying something about what is happening in our interior. If we cannot do this these stories may be instructive in that they are tell us what happened in the past, or they may be telling us what we need to be doing in the present; however, they will not be what they were intended to be: revelatory, in the sense that they describe something taking place in the present, internally, which is being done to us and/or for us.

In order to recapture this revelatory quality of the stories we need to present them using a different paradigm than the mythological paradigm. To our minds, myths are fictions or fabrications. But in point of fact, myths are always true. Their truth, however, does not lie in their objectivity, but rather in their subjectivity. Their truth is found by discovering what these stories are describing or highlighting as interior realities in our own experience. In our time, the language which describes the interior is the language of psychology, and we need to use a psychological paradigm when we tell and interpret these myth stories. Using a psychological paradigm, the characters in the stories, and even the events described in the stories, are representative of emotional and psychological "events" that occur in our own lives and which impact us or move us in particular ways. What follows is an attempt to use a psychological paradigm in elaborating the First Cycle of the Church Year: the seasons of Advent and Christmas, the day of Epiphany, and we will include the Ordinary Time following Epiphany.

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Advent is the first season in the Church Year and in chronological time is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas day. However, Advent is not about the passage of chronological time. Chronological time is time measured with clocks and calendars. Advent is about "kairos" time. Kairos time is a Greek concept and is common in the Bible. It is often depicted as "the fullness of time," the time when God causes something to happen because it is necessary and/or the conditions are right for it to happen. Kairos time is time organized around personal events—emotional, psychological, or spiritual issues related to identity and meaning. Kairos time is concerned with changes and transformations worked deeply inside us during the passage of Chronological time. As such, Advent happens to us

personally – in our individual experience – when the time is right and necessary. And, Advent lasts as long as is required.

The entire season of Advent honors and celebrates our being prepared to receive a gift from God, a gift which we celebrate during the season of Christmas. It is important to remember that **Advent is a time when we are made ready** to receive that gift. **Advent is NOT a time for us to ready ourselves** to receive it, although mostly we think of Advent as a time of self-preparation. In order to receive what God offers us, a place needs to be prepared within us into which something different can come to life. The problem with the idea of "our getting ready" is that our efforts to do so are based on familiar and customary assumptions and conclusions as to what is valuable and important and real, the same assumptions and conclusions that cement our current life together. Our efforts to "get ready" add more of the same to our life, and therefore get in the way of whatever is new that God is preparing us to receive. Each of the four Sundays of Advent highlights one aspect of the way we are made receptive, and the result of all four is the creation of an emotional and psychological "space" into which something different can be manifest.

In order for us to receive something new, our natural tendency to believe unreservedly in our familiar life needs to be disabled in some way. That is, we need to no longer be able to take ourselves at face value. That disabling is the theme of the **First Sunday of Advent.** The Gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent are always a passage that describes a time when an upheaval takes place and the "Son of Man" arrives. These passages are usually referred to as "apocalypses;" they are dramatic descriptions of events that "uncover" and "reveal" things. [These two words are the root of "apocalypse"] (Year A – Matthew 24:36-44, Year B – Mark 13:24-37, Year C – Luke 21:25-36) [*] The Son of Man is a figure in mythology whose appearance initiates a change: the ending of something that has been, and the beginning of something which will become. These readings describe the way God prepares us internally to be receptive, since our becoming receptive is the means whereby change can be initiated. The Son of Man arrives for us when what these texts describe begins to be experienced. It happens in this way: something occurs, subjectively or objectively, which takes away our ability to easily live as we normally and automatically live. Whatever occurs, it is sometimes which produces a void or an emptiness, like the bottom falling out of our usual way of seeing something and/or experiencing ourselves. Sometimes this is very dramatic, and sometimes it is more subtle. Whatever occurs grabs our attention, and we are drawn into the exploration of its implications. This experience can be described as one of loss, of being lost, of disappointment, of disillusionment, of grief; the heart falls out of an important way we have experienced something, especially ourselves, so that we are no longer able to live with enthusiasm and conviction in the same way as we did before.

There are many subjective and/or objective events that alter the way we see and experience ourselves, events which expand our experience of ourselves. When these events are ones we can assimilate and integrate on our own they are **not** the subject of Advent or of the entire Church Year. The Church Year as a whole, and Advent in particular, is concerned with those events we cannot assimilate and integrate on our own. In Advent an emptiness or sparseness appears inside us, even if the "trigger" was something outside us, and it does so in a way that is specific to us and is very personal. The First Sunday of Advent highlights experiences like losing one's "home," or maybe being exiled from home since a person doesn't choose this, and a longing begins for a return to some place more

familiar. The three Gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent are filled with images which are poetic and dramatic and describe our familiar world being deprived of strength. The vivid quality of the readings sometimes gets close to the actual experience which this disabling brings.

**The Second Sunday of Advent** is concerned with efforts to put the heart back into what has fallen apart. It is very natural and human to strive to fix this situation since we all need to maintain the usual way we experience ourselves so that our sense of self remains intact and viable. John the Baptist is always the subject of the Gospel readings for the second Sunday of Advent (Year A – Matthew 3:1-12, Year B – Mark 1:1-8, Year C – Luke 3:1-6). Our experience of John the Baptist is as an internal urging, or more likely an imperative, that drives us to attempt to reverse our loss and bring ourselves back to the way we were before any emptiness occurred. John calls us to repent. The Greek word translated as "repent" is *metanoia*. Metanoia means "thinking again or afterwards." Most people think of repentance morally, as feeling remorse for our "sins," or regret that we have missed the mark and our life is not as it should be. "Remorse" and "regret" are often the motivators for "thinking again and afterwards." We feel remorse and regret over how we are, and these feelings motivate the efforts to repair the hole somewhere in the center of our heart. There is an additional way to understand repentance; it can also mean "to think differently, or to think beyond" the way we normally think. We are responding to the urging John is when we make efforts to fix what has fallen apart by trying on different ways to think about what has happened to us, looking for a context that lessens the loss (for example, seeing the loss as part of God's plan and hoping for a return of what was). We also try on acting differently than normal. The second Sunday of Advent underscores the importance and legitimacy of these efforts to fix our life—making these efforts is an essential part of what prepares us to receive something different that will come to us. Ultimately, however, our efforts to mend the disabling of our familiar world are not successful. As we make these efforts to fix what has fallen apart we discover that the loss we feel is not addressed, and that it is virtually impossible to go beyond our current way of thinking all by ourselves.

This brings us to the **Third Sunday of Advent**. The Gospel readings again focus on John the Baptist. In these readings John is either in prison (Year A – Matthew 2:2-11) or is pointing beyond himself to the One who is coming after him (Year B – John 1:6-8, 19-28, Year C – Luke 3:7-18). The interpretation of this is that we come to a realization: namely, that our efforts to reverse what has happened to us do not achieve our goal of changing how we experience ourselves. No matter how hard we work to succeed, we remain imprisoned in the same loss of our familiar world. We realize that something beyond our own efforts is needed for us to recover. Our efforts to fix this situation, and the ultimate failure of those efforts, are essential to the unfolding of Advent. They expose a limit to our ability to pull our life together, and as that limit becomes real we are left with emptiness in the center of our experience of ourselves. This emptiness will become the place into which something new will come to life.

The **Fourth Sunday of Advent** pivots around the reinterpreting of our situation. Mostly we view the situation we are in as a failure and see that failure as being our fault. The Gospel readings for this Sunday focus on either Mary or Joseph, and on God sending an angel saying not to be afraid for God is in the middle of all of this. (Year A – Matthew 1:18-25, Year B – Luke 1:26-38, Year C – Luke 1:39-45) The way we experience God's

involvement is as a shift being orchestrated within us, so that we stop looking at our loss of heart in terms of fault and blame. We begin to think differently about our situation. Using a metaphor, we realize that we are "pregnant," that "a new life' is growing within us. We begin to realize that what will come to life in us through our situation will be something which will address our remorse and regret and the unsettling state of our life. We are brought to a place where it is possible to surrender to our inability to repair our lives, which leaves us waiting expectantly and longingly to see what God will bring to life within us.

In the process of being taken on this Advent journey, a place is cultivated in us to receive something of which we would never conceive – our being acceptable to God with our un-fixed life and our unresolved loss of heart. We stop trying to fix something we are not able to fix, and as a result we receive something we cannot manufacture for ourselves—relief that the loss of heart is not our fault, and also the awareness that our situation is not something we need to fix at all; it is something we need to receive and attend to, and wait upon and in.

**Christmas** is the celebration of this acceptance coming to life in us and growing in us. We commonly think of Christmas as being about a general experience of being loved and accepted. This is an inadequate understanding of the uniqueness that is Christmas. The experience of being loved by God is offered to us all the time. It is the primary characteristic of God as the First Person of the Trinity. Christmas is more focused and specific; it directly addresses our being accepted by God as a person whose loss of heart and faltering life makes us feel unlovable and unworthy of being loved. The joy of Christmas comes from the realization that our personal loss of heart is not our fault, and, more importantly, that we are accepted as a person whose heart has been lost. Our heart does not get restored, not yet, and yet still we are accepted by God. The power of the Christmas experience comes from it being this personal and concrete. The gift of Christmas is our being acceptable as we are, especially when we are "heart-less" and cannot feel lovable or loved or loving; we are accepted being unable to feel acceptable.

Christmas is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of it. The experience of Christmas lasts a short time (the season is only twelve days) and is like an "ah-ha." Very quickly this experience appears in or is manifest in our adult life. We enter our ordinary life with a hole in our center, and with the knowing that we are acceptable to God just as we are, and there is more to come.

The appearance of this experience in our ordinary life is what we celebrate on the **Day of Epiphany.** We explore that experience as a reality in our ordinary life in the **Ordinary Time Following Epiphany**. Everything God will do with us builds on the acceptance celebrated at Christmas. God will bring our life together again [kairos time], but not yet, and not for a while [chronological time]. Chronological time is required to explore and understand the implications and ramifications of being accepted and welcomed by God even as we continue to live a life we still do not welcome and continue to find unacceptable.

(Jim Robie, 11-24-15)

[* The letters A, B and C refer to the three year cycle of readings that make up the Lectionary.]