

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

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 in which persons say and do things. So in the time 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. These stories originated in a time when there was virtually no separation between what we call the subjective or internal world and the objective or external world. The ancient thought-world was very different from our thought-world, so different that it is very difficult for us to enter the thought-world that existed then. In the ancient thought-world the words used in the telling of these stories would have had both an internal and an external reference, if thinking in this way had been available at that time. That is, even though in their telling they told about external events happening outside us, in their hearing they would convey something that was true about us which was happening internally, inside us.

The human mind has changed since ancient times, so that for more and more people these stories no longer work this way. Our modern minds make a definitive distinction between internal events and external events. When we read these ancient stories now, we do so with our modern mind which reads them as though they are reporting an objective, historical narrative. Read in this way the stories may be interesting, or they may be entertaining, and/or they may be especially instructive in that they either tell us something that did happen or they tell us something we need to be doing. However, this is not how they were intended to be taken. Originally, these stories were revelatory in the sense that they described something taking place internally, inside us, 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 ancient, 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 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 ancient 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 seasons of Advent and Christmas.

+ + + + + + +

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 the type of time we measure with watches and calendars. Advent is about kairos time. Kairos time is a different kind of time which is often described as “the fullness of time” or the time when God causes something to happen because the conditions are right for it to happen. Kairos time is time organized around personal events, like emotional, psychological, or spiritual issues related to identity and meaning. Kairos time is about changes and transformations

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

worked deeply inside us over time. As such, Advent happens to us personally – in our individual experience – when the time is right and necessary, and stays as long as is required.

The 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 by God to receive that gift. Advent is NOT a time for US to get ready to receive it**, which is the way many people interpret Advent. In order to receive the gift God offers us during the experience of Christmas, a place needs to be prepared within us into which something different can come to life and grow. The problem with the idea of our “getting ready” is that our efforts to get ready fill our life with more of what our life already contains, and therefore our efforts to “get ready,” stand in the way of what God is preparing us to receive. Each of the four Sundays of Advent highlights one aspect of the way we are made ready.

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 so that we are no longer able to take ourselves at face value. That disabling is the heart of the first Sunday of Advent.

The lectionary readings for **the first Sunday of Advent** are always a passage that describes a time when a cataclysm takes place and “the Son of Man” comes. Scholars call these passages “little apocalypses.” (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. We would describe the coming of the Son of Man as the start of a fundamental change in our experience of ourselves and the way we define ourselves. These little apocalypses describe an experience which comes to us, and do so in vivid, imaginative and poetic, language. We would describe the experience in this way: an insight comes to us which forces us to see through or see behind some way we have always understood ourselves; or, we encounter something about ourselves which lies outside our notion of what is acceptable and suitable. Something happens which causes the bottom to fall out of our usual way of seeing ourselves. What we see grabs our attention and we are drawn into the exploration of its implications. This experience is one of loss and of being lost; the heart falls out of an important way we have seen ourselves so that we are no longer able to live with enthusiasm and conviction in the same way as we did before. We lose the ability to navigate our life with confidence and certainty. Our familiar world falls apart from the inside, and it does so in a way that is specific to us and is very personal. This is one reason the season of Advent is often associated with the Exile in Babylon. The Old Testament readings all come from the Exile, as do many of the images in the Advent hymn, O Come, O Come Emmanuel. The three Gospel readings for the first Sunday of Advent are filled with images which are dramatic and describe the familiar world being disabled. The vivid quality of the readings sometimes gets close to the actual experience which this disabling brings.

It is very natural and human to strive to fix this situation. None of us want to feel lost, or have the bottom drop out of our lives, or be forced to confront things about

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

ourselves that we would rather repress or deny. All of us need to maintain belief in the usual way we experience ourselves so that our sense of self remains viable. The second and third Sundays of Advent are concerned with our efforts to put the heart back into what has fallen apart, and the failure of our effort to do that.

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) John is also a figure in mythology. We would experience him as an urging which comes to us and calls us to come out into this wilderness we are in; it invites us to be immersed in a descent into the experience we are having. John calls us to repent. The Greek word translated as “repent” is metanoia. One way of defining metanoia is as “thinking again or thinking afterwards.” Mostly we interpret this way of thinking about repentance morally, as feeling remorse or regret that we have missed the mark and our life is not as it should be. Given the loss of heart that we are experiencing, John would represent the “pull” or “call” to think about our situation. The message of John the Baptist then drives us to attempt to reverse our loss and bring ourselves back to the way we were before the heart fell out. 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 another way to understand repentance; it can also mean “to think differently, or to think beyond” the way we normally think. As we make the effort to think about our situation in terms that do not involve remorse or regret we discover it is virtually impossible to go beyond our current way of thinking all by ourselves. The second Sunday of Advent underscores the importance and legitimacy of this effort to fix our life—the effort prepares the way for something different that will come to us.

Ultimately, however, our efforts to mend the disabling of our familiar world are not successful, which is the subject of the gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent. The readings for **the third Sunday of Advent** focus again 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 realize our efforts to “undo” 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. 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 sinks in we are left with emptiness in the center of our experience of ourselves. That emptiness will become the place into which something new may 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 lectionary readings for this Sunday focus on either Mary or Joseph, and on God sending an angel to tell us not to be afraid, for God is with us, and will bring something to life through our loss. (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 in our situation is as a shift within us such that we stop looking at our loss of heart in terms of fault and blame. We

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

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. Slowly, we surrender to our inability to repair our lives and we wait 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 unresolved loss of heart, a relief that the loss of heart is not our fault, and an awareness that this is not something we need to fix but something we need to receive and welcome and care for.

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. That 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 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 and welcomed 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, loved or loving; we are accepted even when we are unable to feel acceptable.

Christmas is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of it. The celebration of Christmas lasts only twelve days, but the repercussions of Christmas stretch out far into the future. This experience of being accepted appears in or is manifest in our adult life. It appears as a non-moralizing mind that comes alive in us and exists alongside of our judgmental and critical mind. Even though we have a hole in our center and are judged because of it, what we also know is that we are acceptable to God being this way, and God will bring us a new and different life through our being this way. This event, the appearance of this non-moralizing and accepting mind, is what we celebrate as **Epiphany**. Everything God will do with us builds on the acceptance celebrated at Christmas. God will bring our life together again, but not yet, and not for a while. Time is required to explore and understand the implications and ramifications of being accepted by God even as we continue to live a life we still find unacceptable. This exploration begins and develops in the **Ordinary Time following Epiphany**.

Written by the Rev. Jim Robie and edited by the Rev. Dr. Hampton Deck. (11-26-12)