

# AN INTRODUCTION TO A BIBLICAL STUDY OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Western (and particularly American) Christians of the twenty-first century approach their faith from out of the western traditions of individualism, independence and self-determination. We view life through the colored glasses of these traditions. Consequently, we read the Bible from these same perspectives. People from Asia, Africa, the Mideast and Latin America, however, read the Bible quite differently. They view the Bible from their cultural perspectives on life as being corporate, intertwined and profoundly social.

Which is right? How should one read the Bible? Well, when one considers that the Bible was written by Mideasterners and not Europeans or North Americans, one must realize that the Bible is written out of a corporate, social and interdependent cultural perspective. Thus, when one reads the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5); one is primarily reading instructions to the nation (a corporate entity) to be centered in Yahweh, and only secondarily to individuals within that nation.

In order to capture the authentic message of the scriptures, it is important for us who are westerners (and especially Americans) to remove our cultural individualistic sunglasses and see through the clear discerning glasses of a people who both viewed life and wrote their Bible from a corporate, social and interdependent perspective.

Much of the church today uses the lectionary each Sunday to cover much of the Bible in a three-year cycle of weekly readings from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Epistles (including Acts). The lectionary we use in the dispersed religious community of Partners in Urban Transformation is the *Common Lectionary* (Revised), developed by the Consultation on Common Texts. The Consultation is a forum for liturgical renewal among many of the Christian churches of North America. For this year, we are using Cycle A.

The many associates and board of Partners in Urban Transformation, all of whom are actively involved in ministry, work with the PUT staff in using this lectionary in our worship together, in our dispersed worship and within our local congregations as the scriptures for specific Sundays. Out of our corporate reflection on given texts, the lectionary for a given Sunday is then released on our website three weeks before it is to be used in worship in order to enable pastors and Christian workers to use these scriptures in their personal reflection, for sermon preparation and for Bible study.

What is significant about this biblical work, however, is that it intentionally seeks to read the Bible with the Hebrew and early Christian “eye-glasses” of a people and a faith that is corporate in perspective, committed to the transformation of the world, is centered on social justice and stresses our interdependence with each other.

We hope you will find these Bible studies helpful both for your personal reflection upon scripture and in your sharing of scripture through the sermons you may preach and the Bible studies you may teach.

Robert Linthicum

(Cycle A Advent 1.doc)

# ADVENT

## The First Season of the Christian Year

### ADVENT AND THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Advent is the beginning of the Christian Year. The Christian Year and the Season of Advent both begin on the Sunday nearest to November 30. Thus, the Christian Year does not follow the Julian calendar, beginning on January 1, but follows its own calendar, beginning in late November or early December.

What is the Christian Year? It is simply the means by which the Christian Church, to some degree or another and in all of its traditions, remembers and celebrates the important events both in the life of Christ and in the church's formation of itself as a community of believers. Even the most nonliturgical of churches celebrate at least some part of the Christian Year – in that they will inevitably celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. The most liturgical of churches – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican – will celebrate the Christian Year both in its entirety and throughout its worship. Other churches – like the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Reformed will use it optionally in worship so that, for example, you can attend worship in some Presbyterian churches that follow the Christian Year assiduously while other Presbyterian churches will follow it from time-to-time. But the point is that, to one degree or another, all churches will observe at least some portion of the Christian Year.

The formation of the Christian Year began at the very beginnings of Christianity while it was still a reform movement within Judaism. The very earliest Church would gather as a Jewish community on the Jewish Sabbath to faithfully worship as all Jews would in their synagogues. But they would also gather on “the first day of the week”, the day of Jesus' resurrection, to study together the Hebrew scriptures in the light of their experience with Christ, to enjoy table fellowship together, but most of all, to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in obedience to their Lord (Acts 1-9). This weekly gathering of Christians to celebrate that sacrament together – even before they had taken their leave of their Jewish heritage – was the origin of the Christian Year.

From that origin in the Christian communities of the earliest Church, the Christian Year began building. Likely, the first holiday (holy day) the Christians began celebrating as a special day within their year was Easter. Good Friday would have soon followed, then Pentecost, then Christmas. Gradually, more and more days of the year – both Sundays and other days (like the celebration of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist) – were intentionally celebrated by the Church. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and one of the earliest writers of the church after the writing of the New Testament, noted how the Christians celebrated Easter in the first century. By the fifth century, the Christian Year was well established, and has continued developing ever since.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 68=106.

The primary ways the Christian Year is celebrated today is through its seasons and the use of the lectionary. The seasons (e.g., Lent, Advent, Epiphany, Pentecost) provide a vehicle by which churches celebrate significant moments in the life of Christ and use those moments as vehicles for reflection, prayer, the observance of disciplines, or for merry-making! They will celebrate those seasons through music (e.g., Christmas carols, Easter hymns), through brightly colored banners, stoles and paraments (e.g., purple for Lent, white for Christmas and Easter, red for Good Friday – the choice of the appropriate color is obvious), and for some churches, through liturgies. But the most important way the Church observes the Christian Year is through the lectionary.

The lectionary consists of three or four passages of scripture used in every worship service of the Christian Year. Those churches that use three passages of scripture traditionally select from the lectionary an Old Testament lesson, a Gospel lesson and an Epistle lesson. Those traditions that use four passages of scripture add to the lectionary one Psalm each Sunday.

The choice of scripture in the lectionary is for a three-year period. Then it repeats itself. By assiduously using the lectionary over its three-year period, a church will have covered almost the entirety of the Bible. The homily or sermon for the day is to be built upon the lectionary readings, so that what is preached is an exploration and explanation of those scriptures made relevant to life in today's world. Thus, use of the lectionary guarantees that the preacher will not end up pursuing a theological "hobby-horse", preaching on what most intrigues him or her. Rather, the lectionary forces the preacher to always be encountering scripture that he or she might not normally study, and allow God to speak to that preacher and through that preacher God's Word for God's people on that Sunday.

## THE SEASON OF ADVENT

The word "advent" simply means "coming" or "arrival", and is from the Latin, *adventus*.<sup>2</sup> Its use in Christianity is in reference to the coming of Jesus Christ. Advent is the ecclesiastical season immediately before Christmas. In Western Christendom, Advent begins on the Sunday closest to November 30, continues for four Sundays, and concludes with Christmas Eve. In the Orthodox churches, Advent begins in the middle of November and is consequently a longer season. In both traditions, Advent signals the beginning of the Christian Year – so it both signals the coming of Christ and the arrival of the "New (Christian) Year"! Its liturgical color is purple.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of Advent is to prepare Christians for the coming birth of Jesus Christ. It stresses both the coming of Christ as a babe to the world and his coming again to rule the earth. But it also stresses his continual coming into the hearts of those who "prepare him room". As Pascal so beautifully put it, "Jesus Christ and the apostles taught us that there would be two advents, one in lowliness to humble the proud, the other in glory to exalt the humble".<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 19-20; *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1035-1036.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

All the liturgies, Advent hymns and the lectionary readings emphasize the doctrine of the Incarnation, and each Sunday has its separate emphasis on a portion of the Incarnation. The first Sunday examines Christ's coming in both Creation and in his Exaltation (the second coming). The second Sunday reflects on the revelation of Christ throughout the scripture (that's why this Sunday is normally Universal Bible Sunday, sponsored by the American and British Bible Societies). The third Sunday looks at the coming of Christ prophetically, both examining the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. The final Sunday of Advent concentrates upon the coming of Jesus as a baby in Roman Israel. Thus Advent ends with the attention of all the worshippers being drawn back to the manger and the birth of the Christ child. Our reflections over the next four Sundays will follow this traditional format, as we examine the coming of Jesus "in lowliness to humble the proud, and in glory to exalt the humble"!

(Cycle A Advent 1.doc)

## **The First Sunday in Advent**

**Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14**

**Isaiah 2:1-5** clearly expresses the traditional theme of the first Sunday in Advent – the coming of God’s intentions for humankind through the intervention of God’s chosen one. This Old Testament scripture is a scripture of the “big picture”.

“In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths”. For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:1-5).

This passage presents Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh as the universal deity, drawing all people into one international community of shalom. His call, then, to Israel is for them to “walk in (this) light of the Lord”.

Isaiah’s vision, although written in grand language and in sweeping metaphor, is really quite specific. In the unknown future, he writes, God will act to draw all nations to God’s self. Both people and the systems of the nations will long to be in direct relationship with God, centered on both glorifying and enjoying God forever rather than building their own power, prestige or wealth. Their seeking of relationship with God will evidence itself in their obedience to the implementation of God’s vision for the world (a politics of justice, an economics of equity eliminating poverty, and the building of a relational culture – all resulting in an international society of shalom). The differences between nations will be resolved by God, society will no longer resort to violence and war, and all will walk in the light of the Lord. In other words, what Isaiah is confirming is the biblical dream of all human society existing together as God created them to be – the shalom community!

The primary metaphor that Isaiah uses to present this dream is that of “Zion”. But what, precisely, is Zion? The word, “Zion” and its synonyms “Jerusalem” and “the New Jerusalem” are used in five ways in the Old and New Testaments. It is, first, the oldest part of Jerusalem, the actual “City of David” that resulted from King David’s conquest of the former Canaanite city of Urushalim. Second, “Zion” or “Mount Zion” refers to the hill annexed to Jerusalem by Solomon that became the site of the Jerusalem Temple; thus “Zion” also became a synonym for the temple itself. Third, it became the name of the city of Jerusalem. Fourth, it became by extension a name for the nation and people of Israel as a whole, especially in the Psalms; thus, to refer to “Zion” was not so much referring to a specific city or section within that city but to the entire nation. Finally, especially in the New Testament, the names “Zion” or “the New Jerusalem” came to refer to God’s intentions for humanity, an idealized city as God intended it to be (not the physical city of Jerusalem). All of these uses of “Zion” are likely caught up in this prophecy given by Isaiah, so that he is proclaiming to his listeners that God is not only at work to glorify

their capital city and the seat of David, but is also at work building God's society throughout the world.

Therefore, after Isaiah has articulated once again for the ears of the people God's dream for all humanity, he pleads with Israel, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord" (vs. 5). Even though the full realization of this dream lies long in the future, "in days to come", it is not too early to begin practicing God's kingdom on earth right now. We may not be able to transform the whole world. But we can be responsible for our own actions right here and right now. In our dealings with one another, we can seek to be just, and even compensatory toward the poor and marginalized. We can seek to practice an equitable economics, not lusting after the largest profit possible but rather seeking ways to distribute wealth so that poverty disappears from our midst. We can act to build relationships of love and trust with one another and act openly and transparently with God, seeking to build a relational rather than a unilateral culture. And we can urge and even pressure our political, economic, social, educational and religious institutions to do the same.

We can work for "Christ and His Kingdom" where we are. And by so doing, we can contribute to building toward that day when God's self will act to "establish as the highest of the mountains the mountain of the Lord's house" so that "the word of the Lord" will go forth into the world, and it will be transformed. We can't build Zion, the city (and kingdom) of God. But we can work to construct that portion of its wall assigned to us (Nehemiah 3:3-32).

**Psalm 122** is a song of ascent to the Temple, and therefore a hymn of praise for Jerusalem. It begins with the famous lines, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (122:1)!

This is the psalm that commands the reader to pray for the shalom of Jerusalem (122:6). And it points out how to pray for that peace. "Prosperity to your palaces; peace within your walls; security within your towns" (vss. 6-7).

Here is a clear example of how broad the word "shalom" actually is, because to pray that Jerusalem experience it is defined in the requests for prosperity, peace and security – three of the primary attributes of the word "shalom".

It is also intriguing that the author's motivation to pray for the shalom of Jerusalem is based on his self-interest. His relatives and friends live in it (vs. 8), and therefore its welfare will be their welfare, for both will be "prosperous, full of peace and security". Likewise, the "house of the Lord our God" is there (vs. 9) and he doesn't want it damaged or destroyed. These are the reasons the Psalmist will pray for the shalom and seek the good of his city – out of enlightened self-interest!

**Matthew 24:36-44.** Each annual cycle of the Christian Year features one or more of the canonical Gospels. Cycle A (this year) explores the Gospel of Matthew; Cycle B features both

the Gospels of Mark and of John, and Cycle C examines the Gospel of Luke. Thus, this cycle concentrates upon the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

The gospel of Matthew is a document focused upon reaching the Jews of the first century with the claims of Jesus as Messiah. Toward that end, the author of that gospel stresses the Jewish foundation of Christianity in everything he writes, and is assiduous in working with Old Testament literature he believes supports his claim that it is Jesus of Nazareth who is the authentic Messiah of Israel.

But there is a second theme in Matthew – an equally important theme. That is its emphasis that if Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he is the marginalized Messiah. He is the one on the outskirts, among the rejected ones, ostracized by Israel’s most prominent Jews and systems, bringing a salvation that comes from the margins and not from the center.

A perfect example of this emphasis is the very beginning of the ministry of the adult Jesus. Matthew 4:12-17 tells us that, after John was arrested in Judea, Jesus went north into “the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” to begin his ministry, far from the reach of the Jewish leaders. Zebulun and Naphtali are in “Galilee of the Gentiles” – the extreme margins of Israel. Thus, Matthew tells us, Jesus began his ministry in the literal far corners of Galilee with the proclamation, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). The gospel is first preached at the literal and symbolic margins of Israel’s life, and will come from those margins to turn the center upside down.

Since the First Sunday in Advent deals with God’s coming in transforming power upon the earth both at creation and at the end-time, the call by Jesus in Matthew 24:36-44 to watchfulness is the appropriate call. Today’s Gospel Lesson is a portion of a larger address that Matthew has Jesus give near to his crucifixion (24:3-25:46) in which Jesus talks about the end of this age and his second coming, no longer as Marginalized Messiah but as Conquering Savior. He begins today’s Gospel lesson with the statement, “But about the day and hour (of the coming of the Son of Man; e.g. vs. 30) no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (vs. 36). In other words, Jesus announces that his coming in power is imminent, but it is also delayed. No one knows when he will come. In fact, even he doesn’t know when that day will be when the world will be suddenly transformed into God’s intentions for the world. Only God the Father knows when that event is to occur! Therefore, the proper stance for any follower of Jesus is to be always ready for his return, for when you least expect it, it will happen!

Jesus then gives four examples of people being surprised by or being ready for God’s sudden intervention into our world to transform it into God’s world. The first example is the story of Noah.

“For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man” (vss. 37-39). That is, before the flood and right up to the moment that it began, people were simply living their lives, “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”, totally oblivious to what God was both doing in their midst and what



God was about to do. They were oblivious to what God was presently doing in their midst, even though Noah was busy building the ark and had been specific in sharing with the people God's call to build that ark. The people, who didn't want to be disturbed or diverted from their normal pattern of life, simply ignored or made light of what Noah was doing, thus ignoring God's call to them to repent. It was not until the flood actually came and people first saw the wall of water rushing upon them that they recognized the truth. But by then it was too late to be rescued!

A second and a third example is also given by Jesus. "Then two (men) will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left" (vss. 40-41). Jesus uses metaphors of everyday life: men working their fields, women grinding meal for bread. Suddenly, "one will be taken and one will be left". That is, one of those men and one of those women were prepared for the sudden coming of the Son of Man; they were not like the people in Noah's day "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" but were living life open to the Spirit and working for the building of God's kingdom; they would be the ones rescued. But the other two were only caught up in the living of their days, with no further purpose than simply doing the next thing, and they would be caught short.

The final example is more striking. "If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into" (vs. 43). Jesus likens himself to a thief, breaking into a home at night and catching the owner unawares. Those who are to follow him, he is stating, have to be constantly watchful and vigilant, carefully reading the "signs of the times" and able to understand what is actually going on behind the events themselves, so that they read history theologically. And out of that continuing reading, they can then keep on acting to do God's work to which they are called in the light of God's agenda for the world. "Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (vs. 44).

**Romans 13:11-14** is appropriate for the First Sunday in Advent, because it is Paul's reminder to us that we Christians should be motivated to acting Christ-like in the world, not only out of our desire to live consistent Christian lives and loyalty to him, but also because the Day of the Lord is fast approaching. "You know what time it is", Paul writes to the Roman Church, "how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (13:11-12).

Be spiritually discerning, Paul is commanding the Roman Christians. Become able to read "the signs of the times". Become sensitive to the spiritual warfare in the political, economic and religious order of the world and of the church that is going on behind the intrigues and plans and actions of their leaders. God has an agenda for the world which is at work, with Christ returning right on schedule and the church doing its work in preparation for that event.

In building his argument, Paul uses two metaphors. The first is a salvation metaphor. "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers", he writes. Salvation is more than our individual conversions. For each of us as individuals, it is a process that is not complete until we pass from this earth. For the world as a whole, it is a comprehensive salvation that is continuing

on in society, even though, from time to time, it may not appear to be advancing. There will be a future, final redemption – and it is toward this that we Christians hope and believe and work.

The second metaphor is that of night and day, sleep and wakefulness. “The night is far gone, the day is near”; therefore “wake from sleep”. Wake up! Smell the coffee percolating! Get with God’s program! “Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”. Paul likens this present age to the world just before dawn breaks. The “night” of dominance, the lust for power and greed is about to end; the oppression, exploitation and control by the “powers” of the world is about to cease. Dawn is about to break. The “light of the world” (John 8:12) has come to the world, and we are to prepare for his Second Advent! So become centered on making ready for the coming of the Christ, and not upon your own economic security, political advantage or your status in society.

Paul then intimates how we Christians are to go about welcoming the coming Advent of the Christ. “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (vss. 13-14).

One cannot read this passage from Paul’s writings without thinking of the conversion of St. Augustine. Augustine became, next to Paul, probably the outstanding and influential theologian of the Church, for his theological formulation of Christian faith became the foundational thinking for both Roman Catholic and Reformed (Calvinist) theology. As well as being history’s greatest theologian, Augustine was also Bishop of Hippo where he provided significant leadership and direction to a church making the transition from a Romanized Christian world to a world dominated by barbarians who did not necessarily embrace Christianity.

Before his conversion, however, Augustine strongly rejected Christianity, embracing the philosophy of Manichaeism instead, and generally living a profligate, drunken and sexually exploitive life. But he also wrestled with his soul, once praying “God make me chaste – but not quite yet”.

In his book, *The Confessions*, Augustine tells of his conversion. He was with his friend Aloysius in a walled garden when he heard some children beyond the wall chanting at play, “Take up and read; take up and read”. Seeing a scroll of Paul’s Letter to the Romans lying near him, Augustine picked it up and read the first words upon which his eyes lighted. They were this Sunday’s Epistle Lesson: “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”.

Augustine then writes, “No further would I read, nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away” (St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. (NY: Pocket Books, 1955. pp. 147-148). And St. Augustine had become a Christian!

In this passage, Paul describes discipleship as “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ”, as one puts on a new suit of clothes. He calls upon Christians to live life with a different set of standards than

those of the pagans, stressing that sin not only consists of the easily-observed “sins of the flesh” (orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality and sensuality), but also insidious but often hidden vices (quarreling and jealousy) that can corrupt a church by poisoning the relationships between people. The Christian and the church are to “set aside” this way of acting, thinking and being, and “put on” Christ.

What Paul is referring to in this metaphor was the religious practices of pagan worship and celebrations of his time. When people would go to the temples of their gods, worship of many of those gods required cult prostitution and drunken feasts as the acceptable acting-out of their allegiance to those gods. Not only so, but much of the economics of a city was tied up in those celebrations, using these events to indicate tradesmen’s and merchants’ intent to carry out their business under the protection of and allegiance to that god (this was what the whole “eating meat offered to idols” controversy was all about). One’s committal to a given god and one’s consequent exercise of one’s business practices in allegiance to that god was symbolized by one’s participation in cult prostitution and drunken orgies. In order to so participant, the initiated would take off their “street” clothes and put on temple-consecrated attire; thus, they would “put on” their “god” – and only then could they participate in these “sacred” acts.

Thus, when Paul calls upon the Roman Christians to “put off” the “garb” of sexual promiscuity, orgies, debauchery and drunkenness, he is actually telling them to “put off” the “garb” of allegiance to the gods of Rome (power, prestige, possessions, sexual promiscuity). Instead, they are to “put on” the clothes of “Jesus Christ”, making no provision for their economic security (Christian business-people would be putting their business at risk by not participating in these pagan cultic acts) and abandoning both the sexual promiscuity and debauchery of the temple, as well as the more subtle sins of “quarreling and jealousy” which gnaw away at the integrity of the Christian community. They are to “put off” the priorities of the world (power, prestige, possessions, sexual appeal and promiscuity) and to “put on” Christ-like virtues and priorities. And that is the way to await the Second Advent of our Lord!

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)  
(Cycle A Advent 1.doc)