



The End of Advent

JOSEPH BOTTUM

Christmas has devoured Advent, gobbled it up with the turkey giblets and the goblets of seasonal ale. Every secularized holiday, of course, tends to lose the context it had in the liturgical year.

Across the nation, even in many churches, Easter has hopped across Lent, Halloween has frightened away All Saints, and New Year's has drunk up Epiphany.

Still, the disappearance of Advent seems especially disturbing – for it's injured even the secular Christmas season: opening a hole, from Thanksgiving on, that can be filled only with fiercer, madder, and wilder attempts to anticipate Christmas.

More Christmas trees. More Christmas lights. More tinsel, more tassels, more glitter, more glee – until the glut of candies and carols, ornaments and trimmings, has left almost nothing for Christmas Day. For much of America, Christmas itself arrives nearly as an afterthought: not the fulfillment, but only the end, of the long Yule season that has burned without stop since the stores began their Christmas sales.



Of course, even in the liturgical calendar, the season points ahead to Christmas. Advent genuinely is *adventual* – a *time before*, a *looking forward* – and it lacks meaning without Christmas. But maybe Christmas, in turn, lacks meaning without Advent. All those daily readings from Isaiah, filled with visions of things yet to be, a constant barrage of the future tense: *And it shall come to pass . . . And there shall come forth . . .* A kind of longing pervades the Old Testament selections read in church over the weeks before Christmas – an anxious, almost sorrowful litany of hope only in what has not yet come. Zephaniah. Judges. Malachi. Numbers. *I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.*

What Advent is, really, is a *discipline*: a way of forming anticipation and channeling it toward its goal. There's a flicker of rose on the third Sunday – *Gaudete!*, that day's Mass begins: *Rejoice!* – but then it's back to the dark purple that is the mark of the season in liturgical churches. And what those somber vestments symbolize is the deeply penitential design of Advent. Nothing we can do earns us the gift of Christmas, any more than Lent earns us Easter. But a season of contrition and sacrifice prepares us to understand and feel something about just how great the gift is when at last the day itself arrives.

More than any other holiday, Christmas seems to need its setting in the church year, for without it we have a diminishment of language, a diminishment of culture, and a diminishment of imagination. The Jesse trees and the Advent calendars, St. Martin's Fast and St. Nicholas' Feast, Gaudete Sunday, the

childless crèches, the candle wreaths, the vigil of Christmas Eve: They give a shape to the anticipation of the season. They discipline the ideas and emotions that otherwise would shake themselves to pieces, like a flywheel wobbling wilder and wilder till it finally snaps off its axle.

Maybe that's what has happened to Christmas. The ideas and the emotions have all broken free and smashed their way across the fields. From Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *I heard the bells on Christmas Day / Their old, familiar carols play* to Irving Berlin's *I'm dreaming of a white Christmas / Just like the ones I used to know*, there has been for a long time now something oddly backward looking about Christmas music – some nostalgia that insists on substituting its melancholy for the somber contrition and sorrow of forward-looking Advent.

For a similar reason, the memoir of childhood has become the dominant form of Christmas writing. Often beautiful – from Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales" to Lillian Smith's *Memories of a Large Christmas* – those stories nonetheless deploy their golden-hued Christmassy emotions only toward the past: a kind of contrite feeling without the structure of Advent's contrition, all the regret and sense of absence cast back to what has been and never will be again.

On the other hand, there are plenty of Christmas elements that remain forward looking. In many ways, the season has become little except anticipation – anticipation run amuck, like children so sick with expectation that the reality, when at last it arrives, can never be satisfying. This, too, is something broken off from the liturgical year: another group of adventual feelings without the Advent that gave them form, another set of Christmas ideas set loose to run themselves mad.

Back in the early 1890s, William Dean Howells published a funny little fable called "Christmas Every Day" in one of the most popular venues of the time, *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*. Once upon a time, the narrator explains as the story begins, "there was a little girl who liked Christmas so much that she wanted it to be Christmas every day in the year." What's more, she found a fairy to grant her wish, and she was delighted when Christmas came again on December 26, and December 27, and December 28.

Of course, "after it had gone on about three or four months, the little girl, whenever she came into the room in the morning and saw those great ugly, lumpy stockings dangling at the fireplace, and the disgusting presents around everywhere, used to sit down and burst out crying. In six months she was perfectly exhausted, she couldn't even cry anymore." By October, "people didn't carry presents around nicely anymore. They flung them over the fence or through the window, and, instead of taking great pains to write 'For dear Papa,' or 'Mama' or 'Brother,' or 'Sister,' they used to write, 'Take it, you horrid old thing!' and then go and bang it against the front door."

These days, by the time Christmas actually rolls around, it feels as though this is very nearly what we've had: Christmas every day, at least since Thanksgiving. Often it starts even earlier. This year the glossy catalogues of Christmas clothing and seasonal bric-a-brac started arriving in September, and there were Christmas-shopping ads on the highway billboard signs before Halloween. The anticipatory

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elements reach a crescendo by early December, and their constant scream makes the sudden quiet of Christmas Day almost a relief from the Christmas season.

I don't remember this opposition of Christmas and the Christmas season when I was young. When I was little – ah, the nostalgia of the childhood memoir – I always felt that the days right before Christmas were a time somehow out of time. Christmas Eve, especially, and the arrival of Christmas itself at midnight: The hours moved in ways different from their passage in ordinary time, and the sense of impending completion was somehow like a flavor even to the air we breathed.

I've noticed in recent years, however, that the feeling comes over me more rarely than it used to, and for shorter bits of time. I have to pursue the sense of wonder, the taste in the air, and cling to it self-consciously. Even for me, the endless roar of untethered Christmas anticipation is close to drowning out the disciplined anticipation of Advent. And when Christmas itself arrives, it has begun to seem a day not all that different from any other. Oh, yes, church and home to a big dinner. Presents for the children. A set of decorations. But nothing special, really.

It is this that Advent, rightly kept, would prevent – the thing, in fact, it is designed to halt. Through all the preparatory readings, through all the genealogical Jesse trees, the somber candles on the wreaths, the vigils, and the hymns, Advent keeps Christmas on Christmas Day: a fulfillment, a perfection, of what had gone before. *I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh.*

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