

The Advent we hope for

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Whenever I attend Catholic mass during Advent, as I did last weekend, I'm always struck by how it is simply assumed—how it's a liturgical . . . no, an *ontological* given—that Christmas is nowhere yet in sight.

I realize that many Protestants are thought to envy Catholic liturgy and the facility with which it is “performed” by both priest and people (and I'll admit to a little of this), but I happened to attend St. Brendan on the Second Sunday of Awkward (as the good-humored Father reminded the faithful): they were still struggling through the newly-mandated [changes in the mass](#).

But they got, always get, Advent right — the scriptures and prayers, of course; the music, especially; and, just as important, the mood.

Why is it so hard for most non-Catholics to really embrace this season fully? We give it a wink and a nod, observing a kind of [pseudo-Advent](#), even as our Christmas celebrations — ecclesial, civic, and familial, are in full-swing. I have complained about this so many times for so many years that I'm sick of myself on this one. I mean it. I gotta get over it. Mainline Methodists observing Advent for real, for keeps, for the duration? Never gonna happen.

It can seem like so much liturgical snobbery to beat this dead horse year after year.

“You're a purist,” clergy friends tell me, “and congregational life is messy.”

“If I don't let the choir sing the Christmas Cantata on the second or third Sunday of Advent there'll be hell to pay. I could lose my job.”

“Celebrate the youth Christmas party on December 27th? You're joking, right?”

I know these concerns. I do. Full disclosure: my spouse is a UMC pastor who does his best to lead his congregation into the riches of Advent but who, like most clergy, has

inherited deeply cherished, fiercely preserved "traditions" that make it impossible to really succeed.

But here's what else I know. Most people in the pews are up for the challenge — the mystery, the drama, the strange [*satisfactions*](#) — of Advent. Not all of them. Some of them will refuse, resist, raise a fuss. But they're the ones who complain about *anything* seemingly new or different! Am I right? (And why do we assume that what we do in worship gets put to a vote? Even the subtle, passive-aggressive "voting" by withholding money or snubbing the pastor or whatever – acts usually tolerated with a kind of silent, ulcer-inducing fury. Pastors make themselves sick worrying if worship is "liked." Liturgy by popular opinion, majority rule. So Protestant. But I digress).

I've had the opportunity to talk about Advent and the Christian year to all kinds of Christians in all kinds of churches. In my experience, lay people are interested in church history and liturgical practice (and sacramental theology and biblical interpretation and Christian doctrine and on and on). They sense the poverty of worship when so much of it mimics the banal culture around them. They long for beauty. They're game for change.

And this is not just a liturgical matter. Our jumping the gun on Christmas before Advent is even properly underway is regrettable not so much because it violates a hard and fast rule regarding liturgical propriety but because it robs us of the gift of inhabiting fully a season of deep and necessary paradox – a lack in the life of faith that many church-goers feel keenly.

Judgment and hope are the hallmarks of Advent. Not fire-and-brimstone, God'll-get-you condemnation nor pie-in-the-sky, cross-your-fingers optimism; rather, the judgment necessary to set right a world gone awry, to bring justice to those long-denied it, to scatter the proud and bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly (Lk 1:51-52). Our hope is that this judgment will do its redemptive work and that all of creation might share in the new life made possible by its refining fire (Malachi 3:2). The Advent scriptures heighten our awareness of these stark realities; they remind us that we are called to wait and watch, not passively, but with the expectation that the inbreaking reign of God can come like a thief in the night (another Advent theme): the thief who comes not to steal but to give us all good things.

This is the Advent that ordinary Christians long for, I believe. And so three modest suggestions for recovering (or discovering) this season in all its fullness:

1. We can't talk about Advent only in Advent. Habituating worshipers to the rhythms of the [church calendar](#) requires a year-long (years-long) attentiveness, regular reminders that we occupy time differently, ongoing catechesis about the patterns and practices that shape Christian identity. This truth can be taught in a variety of ways (studies, sermons, and all the rest), even as worshipers embody its reality Sunday after Sunday. But it's not absorbed by osmosis; intentionality is key.

2. Make changes slowly but resolutely. Decide long before Advent (and invite congregational reflection on) what the shape of the season will be. Maybe you'll resolve to learn the Advent hymns you never sing; maybe you'll organize a December study that goes deep into the Advent lections. Hopefully blowout Christmas celebrations will be saved for the twelve-day-long Christmas season.

3. Maintain a sense of humor. There really is nothing quite so obnoxious as a know-it-all who insists on liturgical correctness at the expense of harmony and goodwill. The journey out of our cultural accommodations in Christian worship is an arduous trek that takes time (see suggestion number two); not being so hard on ourselves can lighten the load and bring others along.

In fact it might be — if we're willing to give these and other suggestions a try — that we can say, with the Psalmist on the third Sunday of Advent: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

Amen to that.

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