

Deepening darkness: Anticipating the light

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

It's my favorite time of year—though I never heard the word *Advent* until my mother brought home an Advent calendar one year. Presbyterians didn't observe Advent in western Pennsylvania in those days. I learned about it from the brightly decorated calendar with its tiny paper doors, one for each December day until Christmas. I recall that my little brother succumbed to curiosity and opened the final door soon after the nightly dinnertime ritual began, revealing a manger and the Christ Child. About that same time, a new minister introduced our congregation to the concept of a liturgical season to prepare for Christmas. He also introduced candles and a prayer of confession, which convinced some that he was an agent of Rome or at the very least a closet Episcopalian.

I've loved the season ever since, more so every year. There is the music, for one thing—including the hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." Is there a stronger tune than that fourth-century French composition from the Liturgy of St. James? The deepening darkness of the season is the perfect context for "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," another ancient tune which reminds us of antiquity but also of God's promise of hope and light to exiled people. And it reminds me of Walter Brueggemann's suggestion that exile is where we find ourselves these days and that it is not necessarily a bad place to be, because God comes to people there.

One problem with appreciating Advent is that many people want to sing Christmas carols, not Advent hymns. I try to tell those people about the tradition of waiting in the darkness, anticipating the light. But they say, "It's so gloomy." I've compromised over the years: I try to find an appropriate carol for the second or third Sunday of Advent and then go all out with Christmas carols on the fourth Sunday, which serves as the Christmas celebration for the many transplanted people in my congregation who are headed home for the holiday. My musician colleague rolls his eyes but agreeably goes along.

Christmas comes early on our part of Michigan Avenue, which calls itself the Magnificent Mile. Our merchant neighbors depend on the season for about 90 percent of their annual profit. So they begin to prepare early, well before Halloween. The sidewalks are filled with shoppers. Buses arrive daily from the suburbs and nearby states, disgorge their shoppers in the morning and pick them up, exhausted and heavily laden, in the evening.

We sit in the middle of it all with the somber purple color and sing hymns in a minor key. There is also the witness of our “Electric Sheep.” The church asked a local artist, John David Mooney, to come up with something interesting and faithful for the church to display amid the lavish displays around us. He created four simple, life-size sheep, made from rough lumber and wrapped with the same tiny lights that adorn the trees on the avenue. We put them out in front of the church beside the sidewalk, and they “graze” there quietly during Advent. You can’t see them without stopping, smiling and remembering a story that begins: “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”