

Why I need Advent

Come to the river, wash away your sins, start a new life. Now—because something is coming.

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue



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On spiritual retreats I often hear people say they love Advent more than Christmas. This does not surprise me, since Christians tend to set apart this season to grow, strengthen and explore the boundaries of the soul.

But I wonder—has the Christian culture lost Advent? Advent's call to simplicity, poverty of spirit, and conversion makes Christmas wondrous and, finally, comprehensible. But is the problem as simple as putting up the tree too soon?

I know I'm a curmudgeon about this. When I was a child, no one in our neighborhood put up a tree before Christmas Eve. Childhood anticipation is Christmas's greatest gift. And there was time! Time to mature in years and in spirit. My parents rejected religion, but they created an atmosphere that allowed their children to enjoy it.

For one thing, there was an Advent calendar, a map of the Holy Land, where Mary and Joseph and the donkey traveled from place to place throughout December. Little cardboard doors opened in the Mediterranean Sea, in the rocks, mountains and sky and along the ponderous road. Along the way we met Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph in his many-colored coat, as well as characters along the couple's journey toward Bethlehem: Herod appearing on a castle balcony, the

shepherds abiding in the fields, angels popping up over the rocky plain, the faraway magi alerted to the star. A door of one house opens to the Annunciation, another to the Visitation. The back side of each little door offered a line of scripture, referencing the action taking place inside the picture or a verse from Isaiah—the lion lying down with the lamb, the promise of no more war, the eyes of the blind being opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped. The last and largest door revealed the cave in Bethlehem with Mary holding the baby and Joseph leaning protectively over them. Christmas!

A well-meaning relative gave us a *chocolate* Advent calendar. We enjoyed the chocolate—but it felt, well, wrong somehow.

Some families baked. We sang, banging out hymns at our level of proficiency. We sang the heart out of “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” garbled at first like any nonsense rhyme. But as we matured the verses opened like the Isaiah doors of the Advent calendar—begging for justice, freedom and the knowledge to trust in “thy mighty power to save and give us victory o’er the grave.” These words awakened in me a hope proportional to my growing awareness of worries about the world outside the tenuous safety of childhood. We sang more softly then, like a prayer, “Bind in one the hearts of all mankind.”

On Christmas Eve we played our recordings of *Hansel and Gretel* or *Amahl and the Night Visitors* or, finally, Christmas carols while decorating the tree. I loved (and still love) the Christmas tree. I loved my favorite plaything—the crèche—Joseph, Mary, the shepherds and finally Jesus, especially after church late at night. The kings wandered about the house until Epiphany.

My agnostic mother insisted on reading the Bible story to us on Christmas Eve while we drank hot cider with cinnamon sticks. She opened the Bible and asked, “Do you want kings or shepherds this year?”—that is, did we want to hear Matthew’s or Luke’s version (another gift from her literary integrity). I know this sounds prudish and ungrateful, but other children experience this, too: the excessive mound of presents on Christmas morning that disturbed me without my understanding why. (My mother and grandmother went over the top.) But because of Advent, the messages in the little doors of the calendar and the hymns that we sang, I knew this was not what I was waiting for.

Advent still unfolds like an Advent calendar of images—the seas roiling, the moon and stars falling, the end of the world, the Son of Man coming in clouds to judge and, as always, those Isaiah tropes of peace, justice, hope, reconciliation in those ancient familiar phrases. The soul falls onto an empty plane—a new dimension of time. I find myself in a wilderness. John the Baptist appears and calls me to repent, to turn around, inviting me deeper into the unfolding story. Come to the river, wash away your sins, start a new life. *Now*. Because something is coming! A door opens upon Mary, shelling chickpeas, washing laundry, hauling water from the well or, in subversive medieval art, reading a book. The angel interrupts her ordinary life. And suddenly it is *my* life interrupted by the Divine.

I can't help but wonder if part of the spiritual hunger of our time links somehow to a lack of respect for the season of longing, deep change and dark anticipation. Without Advent, without the soul's journey in tandem with Mary and Joseph, will I even notice the Divine interrupting my ordinary life? How will I discern that gentle star rising upon the horizon obscured by premature holiday glitter? If I do not enter deeply into Advent, how shallow will my transformative journey be toward Galilee, Jerusalem, the cross, the empty tomb, Emmaus and "the ends of the earth"?

This article appeared in the print edition with the title "Season of Longing."