

Christmas music, Advent words

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

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I entered parish ministry with a fair amount of idealism, particularly liturgical idealism. Inconveniently, the liturgical proclivities I picked up in seminary were not especially popular with my first congregation.

This became clear as a sleigh bell during our first Advent season together. I showed up on the first Sunday of Advent with a sermon manuscript on an eschatological text. I referenced the disparate ways the culture and the church prepare for Christmas—the culture jumping right into the fray with garish decorations and bald consumerism, the church solemnly observing a season of waiting and preparation.

It felt odd to preach that sermon in a sanctuary teeming with holiday cheer. The chancel was decked not with tasteful greens and purple paraments but with an explosion of artificial poinsettias and a layer of Christmas decorations.

If the visual clashes weren't enough, the musical ones nearly did me in. Our choir director chose most of the hymns for worship, and I should have known that congregation and pastor weren't on the same page when I received her selections for the day. I had been thinking we should slip in a few favorite carols on the third or fourth Sundays of Advent—you know, to be “pastoral” and all—but I couldn't reconcile “Joy to the World” with [a Gospel reading that begins with a chilling message about fallen stars and shaken heavenly powers](#).

At the time, I was mildly horrified that the church's songs and sanctuary didn't match the biblical and liturgical tradition, let alone my sermon. Now, eight years later, I'm kind of horrified by the ideological neophyte that I was.

I do still prefer the first Sunday of Advent to be just that, and not the first of a series of Christmas Sundays. But not because the church calendar says it must be so. I believe in the importance of Advent because I think people desperately need a season of waiting and preparation. People maybe even need some solemnity. Ever since I [encountered this Walter Brueggeman quote a few weeks ago](#), I haven't been able to get it out of my head: “Churches should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest place in town.” Advent, like Lent, gently pressures the church to worship honestly.

Yet the season poses challenges. Many people want to sing Christmas carols throughout December, and some do not react well to pastors who won't “let” them. I learned to compromise. My first parish took to singing Advent texts that fit the lections for most of the service, then breaking into the carols for our closing hymn each week.

Then one year I followed a link from [The Text This Week](#) to an [Advent wreath litany](#) that includes a hymn text by Sandra Dean. Each of four verses focuses on a different Advent theme—peace, hope, joy and love. Best of all? It was set to the tune MUELLER—better known as “Away in a Manger.”

Brilliant, I thought. Yes, we would be singing plenty of Christmas tunes before the 12 days of Christmas (during which we would likely sing few, since most people believe Christmas is just one day—alas, alack!). But singing an Advent verse set to MUELLER each week bridged a very real gap.

There are other hymns that fit this same need. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, a Presbyterian pastor and prolific hymnist, has written Advent texts set to Christmas tunes for each of the lectionary cycles. “[The Presbyterian Outlook] asked me to do a set of new Advent hymns to Christmas carol tunes for one season,” she explains. “They proved to be so popular, they kept asking me to write new ones for several years so there are more than a dozen of them since I did all of the gospel texts and then started doing the Old Testament ones.” Links to these and other hymns—all of which can be licensed for congregational use—can be found at [Gillette’s website](#).

Last year I again found myself between a liturgical rock and a pastoral hard place. The first Sunday of Advent was in December, so people were already hankering for Christmas carols. It was also a communion Sunday for my United Church of Christ congregation, and I wanted a hymn that could bring some cohesion to an otherwise unwieldy worship service.

Not finding anything quite right, I reviewed [Ruth Duck’s excellent suggestions for hymn text writers](#), pulled up [RhymeZone](#) in my web browser, and proceeded to hum “O Little Town of Bethlehem” ad nauseum as I worked and reworked an original text I called “Communion Carol.” (I clearly used up all my creativity before I got to the title.) I licensed it through Creative Commons and [shared it on my blog](#). Perhaps it can help forge a truce between another liturgically fussy pastor and a congregation that just wants to sing the songs they love.