

Advent is a season of sighs, especially this year

We don't pine for a second coming that will bring the world to an *end*. We pray for the indwelling of Christ that will enable the world to *continue*.

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue

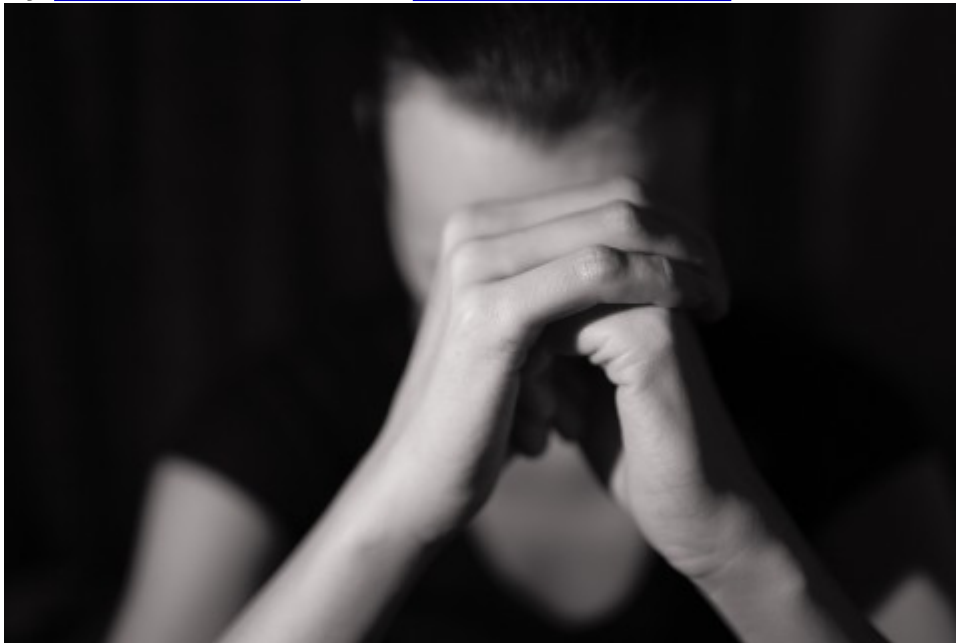


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Before Advent is a word, it is a sigh. A voice crying. A mood. And never more deeply felt than in these troubled months. Advent marks both the exhaustion and the hope of God's people, when the meaning of our lives is expressed in a weary exhalation of ordinary breath and then a sharp intake of something greater.

The prayers and hymns of this season begin with an inarticulate plea for deliverance. It was first voiced not by a hymn writer but by a prophet: "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down" (Is. 64:1). It is in this eighth-century prayer: "O Key of David . . . you open and no one can close; you close and no one can open. O come and lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

“O . . .” We are grieving this Advent, which is not *like* us this close to Christmas. For preachers, the usual challenge of the season is to hold Christmas cheer at bay so as to allow Advent to retain its own brooding character. This year I have a feeling that won’t be a problem. I think we will linger in Advent this year. The Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins captures the depth of our grief in his poem “Spring and Fall.” It is addressed to a sad little girl named Margaret:

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

He concludes on a universal note:

It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

This year, like Margaret, we are mourning ourselves. Collectively, we are taking stock of our losses. If the poet is right about us, and he is, then for whom do we Christians sigh in Advent? We yearn for Emmanuel, God with us. The ancient church awaited the final appearance of the Lord with fasting and penitence. Our ancestors sang, “Come thou long expected Jesus.” But today, especially today, we don’t pine for a second coming that will bring the world to an *end*. We pray for the indwelling of Christ that will enable the world to *continue*.

Advent is the gateway to the incarnation, when God rethought, as it were, what it means to be God and decided to make a full and unreserved investment in the human world. And so it was that Jesus was born in the days when an overrated Roman emperor named Caesar (or “Lord Caesar”) ruled everything and a political nonentity named Quirinius governed Syria. Jesus was born into *that* world, the same world that we inhabit—a world of misery, misrule, and unspeakable beauty, a planet on which we make and take out the garbage, do our laundry in the basement, and watch for meteors in the night.

Advent pays close attention to this world into which Jesus came, and it takes it seriously. Every year we ask, What is it about our world that made his advent necessary? How are we different as a result of his coming?

The normative mood of this season, however, is not a question but something better. Each season of the church year comes with its own color. You might say that each color has an attitude. These days, many churches are choosing blue for Advent—blue, the color of hope.

From somewhere, I remember that the Hebrew word for “wait” can also mean “hope.” (The psalmist says, “I wait for the Lord / and in his word do I hope.”) That’s not as useful a factoid as you might think. For there are a dozen ways of waiting but only one way to hope. We can wait patiently or impatiently, fearfully or in keen anticipation, as realists or as impossible dreamers. It’s possible to wait so long that you forget what you’re waiting for, perhaps in a long checkout line at the grocery store or in the orthodontist’s “waiting room.”

We are waiting—dreading—what one health expert promised would be “our darkest winter,” as COVID-19 spikes and spreads in regions that thought themselves isolated from the worst of it. We are always waiting for Christmas, of course, but this year with no grandparents, siblings, cousins, or other relatives gathered around the tree, with no safe way to sing Yuletide carols in the nursing home (or to be sung to by fresh young voices), and with not enough money for all the toys we wanted but didn’t need.

We are waiting for a new political climate, new leadership, and a new spirit of cooperation among our politicians, all of which we fear will be like waiting for jolly St. Nick to come down the chimney in a house without a fireplace. We are waiting for the guns to fall silent in our streets and for the Proud Boys to see the light. We are primed and waiting for a vaccine, even as we hear warnings that its distribution will be a logistical nightmare and an ethical dilemma. We suspect that the poorest people and the poorest countries will wait the longest for it.

But what of hope? That old realist, Paul, reminds us that “hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom. 8:24). Is it possible that an ominous Advent and a stripped-down Christmas will help us grasp the true object not only of our waiting but of our hope? That suddenly, in the absence of the trimmings, we will realize that Jesus is, like snow in Nebraska, a real possibility this Christmas?

We are hoping—on tiptoe—that Christ will come, not on the clouds of heaven but with surprises that we in a lifetime of waiting never dreamed of. That, once again, he will become one of us and show us the way forward in this world of his and, like

the mysterious Key of David, open doors between us that have been closed for years. We are hoping that, through the faithful efforts of his people, hate will give way to love. Knowing, again with Hopkins, "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his."

It is possible. If Jesus has really become one of us, then he does not represent a category separate from all the things we grieve and fear and wait for. He is God with us—no doubt masked—hiding in plain sight. We may not always recognize this God, but in every act of justice and reconciliation he will be there. He even hears us sigh when we pray, "Amen, come Lord Jesus!"