

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

Advent is the first season in the Church Year and in chronological time is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas day. However, Advent is not about the passage of chronological time, but about changes and transformations worked deeply inside us over time. As such, Advent comes when the time is right and necessary, and stays as long as is required.

The season of Advent honors and celebrates our being prepared to receive a gift from God, a gift which we celebrate during the season of Christmas. It is important to remember that Advent is a time when **we are made ready** to receive that gift, and not a time for **us to get ready** to receive it. In order to receive the gift offered us at Christmas a place needs to be prepared in us into which something different can come to life and grow. The difficulty in our “getting ready” is that our efforts to get ready fill our life with more of what it already contains and therefore get in the way. Each of the four Sundays of Advent highlights one aspect of the way we are made ready.

In order for us to receive something new our ability to believe unreservedly in our familiar life needs to be disabled in some way. We need to no longer be able to take ourselves at face value. That disabling is the heart of the first Sunday of Advent. It happens in this way: an insight comes to us which forces us to see through or see behind some way we have always understood ourselves; or, we encounter something about ourselves which lies outside our notion of what is acceptable and suitable. What we see grabs our attention and we are drawn into the exploration of its implications. This experience is one of loss and of being lost; the heart falls out of an important way we have seen ourselves so that we are no longer able to live with enthusiasm and conviction in the same way as we did before. Our familiar world falls apart from the inside, and it does so in a way that is specific to us and is very personal. The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is filled with images which are poetic and dramatic and describe the familiar world being disabled. The vivid quality of the reading sometimes gets close to the actual experience which this disabling brings.

It is human to strive to fix this situation. The second and third Sundays of Advent are concerned with our efforts to put the heart back into what has fallen apart, and the failure of that effort. All of us need to maintain belief in the usual way we experience ourselves so that our sense of self remains viable. The subject of the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Advent is the call to repent, to think again or differently or afterwards. The second week of Advent focuses on a time in which we attempt to reverse our loss and bring ourselves back to the way we were before the heart fell out. We feel remorse and regret over how we are, and these feelings motivate the efforts to repair the hole somewhere in the center of our body. The second Sunday of Advent underscores the importance and legitimacy of this effort: the effort to fix our life prepares the way for something else that will come to us. Ultimately, however, our efforts to mend the disabling of our familiar world are not successful, which is the subject of the gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent. We realize our efforts do not achieve our goal of changing how we experience ourselves. No matter how hard we work to succeed we remain imprisoned in the same loss. We realize that something beyond our own efforts is needed for us to recover. Our efforts to fix this situation, and the ultimate failure of those efforts, are essential to the unfolding of Advent. They expose a vulnerability in the way

we understand ourselves, and by means of that vulnerability we are made ready to receive something new.

The fourth Sunday of Advent pivots around the reinterpreting of our situation. Mostly we view the situation we are in as a failure and see that failure as being our fault. But then a message (angel) comes and tells us not to be afraid for God is with us. The way we experience God's involvement is as a shift being orchestrated in us such that we stop looking at our loss of heart in terms of fault and blame. We begin to think differently about our situation. Using a metaphor--we realize that we are pregnant and that what will come to life in us through our situation will be something which will address our remorse and regret and the state of our life. Slowly, we surrender to our inability to repair our lives and we wait expectantly and longingly to see what God will bring to life.

In the process of being taken on this journey a place is cultivated in us to receive something of which we would never conceive—our being acceptable to God with our unfixed life and unresolved loss of heart, a relief that the loss of heart is not our fault, and an awareness that this is not something we need to fix but only explore.

Christmas is the celebration of this acceptance coming to life in us and growing in us. We commonly think of Christmas as being about a general experience of being loved and accepted. That is an inadequate understanding of the uniqueness that is Christmas. The experience of being loved by God is offered to us all the time. It is the primary characteristic of God as the First Person of the Trinity. Christmas is more focused and specific; it directly addresses our being accepted by God as a person whose loss of heart and faltering life makes us feel unlovable and unworthy of being loved. The joy of Christmas comes from the realization that our personal loss of heart is not our personal fault, and we are accepted as a person whose heart has been lost. Our heart does not get restored, not yet, and still we are acceptable. The power of the Christmas experience comes from it being this personal and concrete. The gift of Christmas is our being acceptable as we are, especially when we are “heart-less” and do not feel lovable, loved or loving, even when we are unable to feel acceptable and accepted.

Christmas is not the end of the story, but rather the beginning of it. The celebration of Christmas lasts only twelve days, but the repercussions of Christmas stretch out far into the future. Everything God will do with us builds on the acceptance celebrated at Christmas. God will bring our life together again, but not yet, and not for a while. Time is required to explore and understand the implications and ramifications of being accepted by God even as we continue to live a life we still find unacceptable.

(Jim Robie, 11-15-11)