

Setting the Tone: The Impact of an Expanded Advent on the Cycle of the Liturgical Year

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As Jill Comings noted in her paper to this seminar last year, “at the heart of [our] proposal is a desire to re-expose the churches to ‘the great eschatological themes of Advent. . . .’”¹ What else might this proposal re-expose the churches to? What might be the implications of an expanded Advent for the overall shape of the liturgical year? What opportunities and challenges might this proposal present for the rest of the liturgical year? While I propose nothing definite in this essay, I hope to raise questions that will inform our ongoing discussion, as well as that of communities who think our proposal has merit.

Using our proposal, this is how the broad outlines of the liturgical year would look in 2009/2010 (the year we have just begun):

- Seven Sundays of Advent, beginning with the Sunday after All Saints’ Day, November 8th
- Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and two Sundays after Christmas, December 27th and January 3rd
- Epiphany and six Sundays after Epiphany
- Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday, February 17th and including five Sundays, February 21st through March 21st
- Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, March 28th
- The Great Fifty Days of Easter, beginning with Easter Day, April 4th and ending with Pentecost, May 23rd
- The season after Pentecost, beginning with Trinity Sunday, May 30th and ending on Saturday, November 6th, the eve of All Saints’ Sunday

¹Jill Burnett Comings, “Advent, Creation and the Reign of God” (paper, The Advent Project, North American Academy of Liturgy, Baltimore, MD, January 4, 2009), 1, quoting William H. Petersen, “The Advent Project” pamphlet, January 2006.

The Advent Project's proposal offers, in addition to the specific goal for Advent itself: "a desire to re-expose the churches to 'the great eschatological themes of Advent. . .,'" a new opportunity to see, appreciate, and appropriate in a fresh way the shape and sweep of the entire liturgical year. Of course, our proposal is not the first to offer this opportunity. Probably the most notable recasting of the calendar in the twentieth century was the Joint Liturgical Group's (JLG) proposal.² They certainly hoped their work would prompt another look at the liturgical year. In his introduction to the calendar portion of the JLG's proposal, Henry de Candole wrote: "We cannot indeed start afresh and disregard history and centuries of devotion. But we may be able to remove some of the features which blur the general effect, and do some tidying-up and (maybe) improvement."³ In his section on their proposal for the lectionary, Neville Clark went even further. He wrote: "There are compelling reasons for the conclusion that a marginal revision cannot be accepted as the adequate solution for our time."⁴ The JLG's reconfiguration of the calendar and lectionary was ultimately deemed too extreme. Our proposal, on the other hand, by simply expanding Advent to seven weeks, and using the lections already provided in the Roman lectionary (and those based on it) and the extant propers, brings the entire year into new focus in an *organic* way that preserves

²Joint Liturgical Group, *The Calendar and Lectionary: A Reconsideration*, ed. Ronald Claud Dudley Jasper (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

³H. de Candole, "The Calendar," in *Calendar and Lectionary*, 11.

⁴N. Clark, "The Lectionary," in *Calendar and Lectionary*, 15.

its shape and sweep intact.

The most significant fruit of this is an opportunity to re-claim and re-emphasize the Paschal Mystery as the theological, liturgical, and spiritual foundation of Christian life and of the church year. This is needed. Ralph Keifer wrote: "We have a massive religious problem on our hands because the paschal mystery is, to most people, a near-abstraction. The dying and rising of Christ is perceived more as a past event than as a present reality."⁵ While he wrote this in the mid-1970s and in the context of a critique of the newly-revised rites of initiation of the Roman Catholic Church, I suspect that it remains at least to a certain extent true.

Another is the opportunity to re-emphasize the liturgical seasons and their theological, liturgical, and spiritual significance. In "Time Sanctified: A Pastoral Approach," Antone Lynch observes that in his experience as a priest and pastor in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi, many (perhaps most) adults "do not possess a cognitive understanding of the historical, liturgical, and theological concepts associated with the meaning of the liturgical celebrations of Sunday and Easter-Pentecost, and Christmas-Epiphany seasons."⁶

⁵Ralph A. Kiefer, "Christian Initiation: The State of the Question," in *Made, Not Born*, Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 150.

⁶Antone J. Lynch, "Time Sanctified: A Pastoral Approach," *Liturgical Ministry* (Fall 1999): 195. He offers a "Liturgical Seasons Workshop" that may serve as a first step toward addressing this lack of understanding, and suggests concrete steps parishes can take.

A third, which ties these two together, is that our proposal provides an unprecedented opportunity to rethink how the church prepares candidates for initiation (the new Christian's incorporation into the Paschal Mystery) and provides ongoing formation for Christians of every age. In his essay in the Standing Liturgical Commission's volume, *Baptism and Ministry*, William Seth Adams raises questions regarding the church's thinking about, and practice of, initiation that should not be ignored. He asks the church to consider what "the nature of preaching and teaching in the parish about baptism and its place in the life of the church" is, and then goes on to ask:

What is the proclamation on baptismal days? . . . What is the character, content and duration of catechesis in the parish for those preparing for baptism and/or sponsorship? Is the sponsorship of baptismal candidates an identifiable ministry in the parish? Does catechesis continue after baptism? Are the claims made in the parish about the nature of baptism and the ministry of the baptized acted out by clergy and laity alike? Does the parish understand itself as a 'baptizing community'?⁷

With our modest retooling of the calendar, might the four "especially appropriate" baptismal days – Easter, Pentecost, All Saints, and the Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany)⁸ – receive new emphasis, and the

⁷William Seth Adams, "Decoding the Obvious: Reflections on Baptismal Ministry in the Episcopal Church," in *Baptism and Ministry*, Liturgical Studies One, ed. Ruth A. Meyers, for the Standing Liturgical Commission (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 16.

⁸*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with The Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 312. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* recommends the same days: *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 84. *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* of the Roman Catholic Church presupposes that the catechumenate and proximate

seasons preceding them provide new opportunities for both baptismal preparation and ongoing formation: opportunities to immerse (pun partially intended) Christians more deeply into the Paschal Mystery and to help them understand more fully the meaning of the liturgical year -- the framework in which the church lives into, and lives out, the Paschal Mystery? In his *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, Marion Hatchett emphasizes in two different places the integral connection between baptism and the liturgical year. He writes: "one major concern of this revision [1979] is to reestablish the relationship of baptism to the church year."⁹ And again, he says: "The Book emphasizes the baptismal nature of the church year. . . ."¹⁰ Might our proposal reinforce this vital connection and permit the churches to take more fruitful advantage of it?

Baptism at Easter (and pre-eminently at the Easter Vigil), and Lent as a season for baptismal formation and preparation, has been gradually re-discovered and re-appropriated by the churches since the mid-twentieth

preparation for baptism will be timed so that baptism will be celebrated at the Easter Vigil; no other days are especially recommended, except that "as far as possible, the sacraments of initiation are to be celebrated on a Sunday." *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988), 8-9. The current books of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America do not recommend specific days for baptism: *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 403; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 225.

⁹Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 267.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 42.

century. But what of the other primary baptismal days and the weeks that precede them?

As All Saints' Day stands now, it is wedged in among the last few Sundays of Ordinary Time and I suspect, because of this, its theological and liturgical richness and its fitness as a baptismal day is often overlooked. If, instead, it becomes the culmination of the liturgical year, might its "new" position (or its new prominence) give it greater importance as one of the chief baptismal days of the year, and provide a paradigm for the entire year?

As the culmination of the year, a principal feast, and a principal baptismal day, All Saints' Day/Sunday could revolutionize the church school time leading up to it. It is ideally placed to do this. While Labor Day is not, of course, the liturgical or theological beginning of the church year, it is so in practice.¹¹ Many churches resume their full schedules of Sunday School and other educational programs around Labor Day. That means there are seven or eight weeks leading up to All Saints' Day/Sunday. This is a ideal block of time for instruction and formation: for baptism, confirmation, renewal of baptismal vows, commissioning for specific ministries in and by the parish, and ongoing mystagogy.

That this pre-All Saints time is, practically-speaking, a "season" in its own right, with opportunities and challenges not yet fully embraced by the

¹¹Even an eminent liturgiologist like H. Boone Porter has an essay called "Back-to-School Month" in the section on the weeks after Pentecost in his book, *Keeping the Church Year*. H. Boone Porter, *Keeping the Church Year* (New

churches, is the approach taken in *The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for the Season from All Saints to Candlemas*, a Church of England text published in 1990.¹² The volume provides resources for that “season.” “The Service of Light,” the liturgical centerpiece of their proposal, is a flexible service that may be used in a variety of situations and in combination with other services, including baptism and confirmation, on All Saints’ Day/Sunday, Epiphany, and the Baptism of Our Lord.¹³

The other principal baptismal days would also have their logical blocks of preparatory time, if our proposal is followed. The seven Sundays in Advent combined with the two after Christmas make a nine-week block of preparation time for baptisms (and other initiatory rites) on the Baptism of Our Lord (the First Sunday after the Epiphany). Advent is already, in the Episcopal Church at least, intended to be a time of baptismal preparation, even if it is rarely used that way.¹⁴ The six-week block of time available for baptismal preparation, as

York: Seabury Press, 1977), 117-118.

¹²*The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for the Season from All Saints to Candlemas* (London: Church House Publishing; London: Mowbray, 1990), 1. Note that their proposal has similarities to ours. In the outline of the part of the year this book addresses, “All Saints’ Tide”/“Sundays of the Kingdom” is the first, pre-Advent, block of time.

¹³*Promise of His Glory*, 10.

¹⁴*The Book of Occasional Services (BOS)* provides a form for the enrollment of candidates for baptism, and the rubrics note that candidates are enrolled at the beginning of Advent for baptism on the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003), 116.

our calendar stands now, is very likely not quite sufficient in many circumstances. Our proposal to expand Advent would likely make this time of preparation more fruitful and perhaps, therefore, make baptisms and other initiatory rites on the Baptism of Our Lord more workable. The Great Fifty Days of Easter may be used both as a time for mystagogy and as preparation for baptisms at Pentecost.

If the principal baptismal days are emphasized anew, appropriated anew, might the baptismal covenant itself effectively be used as the basis of instruction and formation for most of the liturgical year, for groups of every age? Leonel Mitchell notes that “since the fourth century the content of the creed has provided the topic headings for the instruction of candidates for baptism. . . .”¹⁵ The baptismal covenant, whose centerpiece is, of course, the Apostles’ Creed, could be divided into sections appropriate to each baptismal day and its preceding season of preparation. Baptism or the renewal of baptismal vows (with or without other rites of initiation/reaffirmation) on each of the four baptismal days would serve as the culmination of that “unit” of education/formation. The baptismal covenant could also be used to prepare parents and sponsors, and could provide the stuff for mystagogy as well.¹⁶

¹⁵Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1985), 100.

¹⁶Other churches, of course, use an equivalent of the *BCP* Baptismal Covenant, e.g., *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Affirmation of Baptism, 235-237); *Book of Common Worship* (Profession of Faith, 435-438); *Book of Worship*

I realize that there is a risk in this proposal of artificially dividing the creed. However, I envision that none of these “units” will be used in isolation from the others, and, of course, the story as a whole must never be lost sight of. With those caveats in mind, I have included a preliminary proposal as an appendix to this paper.¹⁷

Use of the baptismal covenant as the primary “text” for both baptismal preparation and ongoing Christian formation might provide an opportunity for churches to move away from an predominately lectionary-based formation to a more liturgically-based formation. *Living the Good News* is a widely-used lectionary-based church school curriculum.¹⁸ *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation & Formation for Christian Life and Ministry*, a publication of the Episcopal Church’s Office of Evangelism Ministries, assumes a lectionary-based curriculum as well.¹⁹ The *Episcopal Children’s Curriculum* and the *Episcopal Curriculum for Youth* are more wide-ranging, and have units devoted to baptism and the church year, among others.²⁰ None of these, however,

(Baptismal Covenant, 111-112).

¹⁷This obviously needs much more thought and discussion, if it is even deemed desirable or workable at all.

¹⁸“Living the Good News,” Morehouse Education Resources, <http://www.morehouseeducation.org/living-the-good-news/> (accessed January 4, 2010).

¹⁹Office of Evangelism Ministries, The Episcopal Church Center, *The Catechumenal Process: Adult Initiation & Formation for Christian Life and Ministry* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), 10 and passim.

²⁰“Episcopal Children’s Curriculum and Episcopal Curriculum for

provide the immersion in the baptismal covenant, with all that implies, that this proposal suggests.²¹

Another advantage to using the baptismal covenant as the foundation for catechesis, mystagogy, and formation suggests itself: this “curriculum” is extremely flexible. Every parish’s circumstances are unique, and each individual’s journey of conversion and growth in the Christian life is unique, too. As Daniel Stevick observes, “However complete Baptism may be sacramentally, it must always be considered the beginning of a process of participation, growth, and response.”²² While, as suggested above, baptism or the renewal of baptismal vows (with or without other rites of initiation/reaffirmation) on each of the four baptismal days would be the culmination of that “unit” of education/formation, this culmination is in no sense a graduation. It is, rather, a process that all participate in at their own pace and from which no one “graduates” this side of the grave. The structure of

Youth,” The Institute for Christian Formation and Leadership, Virginia Theological Seminary, <http://www.vts.edu/podium/default.aspx?t=122314>(accessed January 4, 2010).

²¹The baptismal covenant might also be used in conjunction with the lessons provided for the vigils for the Eve of All Saints’ Day/Sunday (*BOS*, 106-107), the Eve of the Baptism of Our Lord (*BOS*, 51-52), the Eve of Pentecost (*BCP*, 227, 896, 906, and 917), and, of course, the Easter Vigil (*BCP*, 288-291). The *BOS* also provides “A Vigil on the Eve of Baptism” (*BOS*, 131-135). The baptismal covenant could furnish the context in which the lections are explored.

²²Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments; Baptismal Meanings* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 138.

the baptismal covenant makes it clear that belief leads to participation in the Paschal Mystery which in turn leads into a life of worship, mission and service; and this structure provides rich material for both catechetical instruction and ongoing formation.

I began this paper with several questions/issues that continue to engage the church: how can we plumb more deeply the Paschal Mystery and help it to become a lived reality for the faithful, instead of the “near-abstraction” Keifer suggests it is for many; how can we help the faithful appreciate more fully the liturgical year as the foundation and the framework in which the church lives into, and lives out, the Paschal Mystery; and finally, how can we seize the opportunity our proposal presents to reexamine our thinking about and practice of initiation, which Adams insists is crucial if the church is truly to be the church.

I suggested that our proposal, modest as it may look on paper, provides the church with a unique opportunity to address these issues. It brings the primary baptismal days and the weeks preceding them into new focus, allowing the churches to appropriate afresh their possibilities for Christian formation in all its forms.

While we have come a long way in becoming again a Paschal people, and in re-emphasizing the rites of initiation, we still have a way to go, to live ever more deeply that life into which we are called. Might our proposal, and the

implications/opportunities I see stemming from it, help the churches in this ongoing work?