

RATIONALE

The proposal for an expanded Advent is rooted in a very simple idea: to make the Advent we celebrate congruent with the lectionary we already have. Everything else is commentary.

The Problem in Two Parts

Part One: The Eclipse of the Advent Season by the Christmas Culture

Christianity long ago lost Advent to the Christmas culture of the societies in today's world. With little variation, what follows can be observed in cities around the globe and on every continent save Antarctica.

The Christmas decorations lurking in the back corners of supermarkets and home supply stores from late August, join with the surreptitiously expanding shelves of Christmas items in boutiques, pharmacies, and other retail establishments, just waiting for Hallowe'en to pass so that they can all explode into their full manifestation on November 1st. Conjoin to all this the unrelenting barrage of television and other electronic media advertisements and music for the holiday season, and the *parousia* is complete.

Against all this the Church has little defense. For all intents and purposes, then, what has become the global culture of Christmas effectively eclipses the season of Advent, precluding any engagement of its primary focus, namely, the manifestation of God's reign. So, then, the Church needs to reclaim Advent, but "How?" That is the primary question in the face of such a massive challenge.

Part Two: the Church's Complicity with the Culture

Yet before this question is engaged, there is a need to look squarely at the Church's complicity in the situation represented by the Christmas culture. By the time Advent begins, the pressure, even from practicing Christians, to sing Christmas hymns is overwhelming (carols have "graced" mall music for weeks already). Many congregations simply surrender to the Christmas culture and hold such services as "Lessons and Carols" as early as the First Sunday of Advent. Additionally, an ecumenical glance at publishers' catalogues will reveal that much of the popular religious literature about Advent heralds it solely as a season of preparation for the Nativity. Certainly, Advent calendars, replete with chocolate treats, are little more than a "count down" to Christmas. Advent spirituality is reduced to pleas to take time out for reflection on these things amidst the bustle of the season. Thus, by the beginning of December we are well on our way to Bethlehem

The problem with this, of course, is that the primary focus of Advent is the full manifestation of the Reign of God. This is the exclusive focus of the lectionary (Scripture readings) from the Sunday after All Saints' Day (November 1) until the last week of Advent. Only in the last week do these readings which form the thematic emphasis of the Church's weekly worship begin to shift from a focus on eschatology to that of incarnation.

The Proposal in Two Parts

Part One: Expanding Advent from Four to Seven Weeks

In its origin, the season of Advent was nearly seven weeks. The Gregorian Sacramentary introduced a four-week Advent in Rome in the seventh century, but this truncated version of the season was not widely adopted in other western churches until the twelfth or thirteenth century. The Orthodox still observe a longer Advent, though in the eastern tradition Advent has not been viewed as the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. By the time of the 16th-century western reformations, however, though few remembered that Advent had once been longer, the season was clearly fixed as the initiation of a new liturgical year and, in the face of no competition from the Christmas culture until the 20th century, its focus was clearly eschatological.¹

The intent of the season is to look to the end, to the fulfillment of the implications of the Paschal Mystery set forth "for us and for our salvation" [Nicene Creed] in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, the focus is on the Christian hope represented by the full manifestation of the Reign of God established in Christ. In this respect, then, Advent is about eschatology. It is a looking to the end, to the goal, to the eternal moment that makes sense of all our moments. One of the implications of this is the need to recover the understanding that this is the primary focus of Advent. It is a season not so much a preparation for the incarnation, the celebration of Christmas, but a season that sets the context for the entire liturgical year and keeps it, properly observed, from being merely a repetitive cycle. In other words, by this emphasis, Advent calls us to enter the cycle each year with deeper understandings, wider horizons, and higher expectations.

In the liturgical renewal of our times, there has been an ecumenical movement among the churches toward a common lectionary. There is a growing congruence in this regard and that fact is aptly represented by the three-year cycle of Scripture readings in the *Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)* as developed and published by the Consultation on Common Texts, itself representing a very wide participation of traditions.

The *RCL* reflects a change of atmosphere after the beginning of November.² We are immediately put in mind of the great eschatological themes of the Gospel. The kingdom parables of the long summer and autumnal season after Pentecost follow Jesus around the countryside, but now the kingdom parables take on a harvest-time or in-gathering and fulfillment character. And this Gospel focus is supported by prophetic and apostolic readings. These thematic foci of our worship call us not so much (as in past constructions of Advent) to cringe before an angry Judge who will wreak apocalyptic havoc on a creation gone bad, but to our responsibilities as agents-in-Christ of God's reign for a renewed creation. We are encouraged to look toward a hope that is neither millennialist nor rapturist, but a vision perhaps best realized when it is set to the glorious music that nearly everyone knows from Handel's oratorio *Messiah*: "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.

¹ The eschatology of God's reign was, however, largely conceived as anticipation of a fearful judgment to come with the end of the world and its feeling was more aptly expressed in the *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath) than any other more positive mode such as, for instance, the text Handel used for the "Hallelujah Chorus" (see below).

² Cf. below a thematic Chart of RCL Readings for an Expanded Advent

Hallelujah!”³

Part Two: The Shape and Feel of an Expanded Advent

So, if the primary focus of Advent is eschatological rather than incarnational, then a season expanded from its present truncated form of four weeks to a more comprehensive seven weeks in accordance with the lectionary seems in order. What might it look like? How would it feel? Another part of this web site is devoted to resources for worship. Presently, the calendar and its ordering is of direct concern.

It has already been noted that no revision of the lectionary would be necessary to this proposal. In an expanded Advent, the earliest date upon which the first Sunday in Advent could occur would be November 5. The latest date for its start would be November 12.⁴ The overall pattern is this:

Advent I	the Sunday falling on or between	November 05 - 12
Advent II	" " " " "	November 13 - 19
Advent III	" " " " "	November 20 - 26
Advent IV	" " " " "	Nov. 27 - Dec. 03
Advent V	" " " " "	December 04 - 10
Advent VI	" " " " "	December 11 - 17
Advent VII	" " " " "	December 18 - 24

Having established a pattern, the subject of substance becomes central. For this, reference is made to another piece of music with which nearly all Christians of whatever tradition are familiar, it is the great Advent hymn *Veni, Emmanuel* (“O come, o come, Emmanuel”). Many, however, may not be aware that the verses of the hymn appearing in the 18th century are compiled from much earlier antiphons (9th century at the latest) for the *Magnificat* (“Song of Mary,” Luke 1:47-55) which were sung by monastics at Evensong/Vespers each year from 17 - 24 December. The center of each text was a different scriptural messianic title and they were called the Great “O” Antiphons because each began with an expanded singing of that syllable.⁵

The hymn represents a projection of the “O” antiphons, albeit in a condensed manner, upon a

³ Revelation 11:15b. While the “Hallelujah” chorus is well-known, its actual text is not often remembered.

⁴ For those traditions observing All Saints’ Day on the Sunday following All Saints’ Day, a decision would occasionally have to be made to observe the feast on the day itself rather than on the following Sunday which would fall within the expanded Advent season if that Sunday were the 5th, 6th, or 7th of November.

⁵ The Scriptural Bases for the “O” Antiphons are as follows:

<i>Sapientia</i>	(Wisdom)	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 1:4; Gospel of John 1
<i>Adonai</i>	(Lord)	Isaiah 6:3; 1 Corinthians 2:8
<i>Rex gentium</i>	(King of nations)	Psalms 99:1, 4; Revelation 11:15, 15:3
<i>Radix Jesse</i>	(Root of Jesse)	Isaiah 11:1; Romans 15:12
<i>Clavis David</i>	(Key of David)	Isaiah 22:22; Revelation 3:7
<i>Oriens</i>	(Morning Star)	Isaiah 60:3; Hosea 6:3; Gospel of Luke 1:78
<i>Emmanuel</i>	(God with us)	Isaiah 7:14; Gospel of Matthew 1:23

screen that became to available worshipers beyond the monastic context. The familiarity of the hymn attests to the success of the strategy. Now, however, the present proposal suggests unpacking the antiphons and projecting them upon the screen of an expanded Advent. Each of the seven messianic titles would provide a focal theme for the successive Sundays of Advent. Thus:

Advent I	<i>O Sapientia</i>	Wisdom	“wisdom from on high”
Advent II	<i>O Adonai</i>	Lord	“Lord of might”
Advent III	<i>O Rex gentium</i>	Ruler of nations	“desire of nations”
Advent IV	<i>O radix Jesse</i>	Root of Jesse	“branch of Jesse’s tree”
Advent V	<i>O clavis David</i>	Key of David	“key of David”
Advent VI	<i>O Oriens</i>	Morning Star	“dayspring from on high”
Advent VII	<i>O Emmanuel</i>	God with us	“Emmanuel”

Using these titles in this way would continue to honor the now-established principle of liturgical renewal that every Sunday in the church year is principally a feast of Christ. In addition, the customary order of the “O” antiphons is slightly altered in this schema so as to observe *Rex gentium* appropriately on the new Advent III (Sunday falling between November 20 - 26), thus avoiding any displacement for traditions observing Christ the King Sunday.

It will be seen in the Resources section of this web site that these “O” antiphon foci actually provide the subject for the collects or theme-prayers for each Sunday of an expanded Advent that provide the transition in the Sunday *ordo* from the Gathering/Entrance Rite/Call-to-Worship to the Liturgy of the Word for that day.

Recapitulation and Request

In a counter-cultural move, this proposal for an expanded Advent puts the beginning of the Christian year where it ought to be, namely, looking at the end or goal with the already established eschatological themes of three-year lectionary. The season would then move gradually from the initial and primary focus of Advent to the incarnational one that begins the annual rehearsal of the life and ministry of Jesus with the Nativity.

The Advent Project Seminar welcomes any and all reflection on this proposal. Furthermore, if any congregation, religious community, or seminary would be interested in an experimental trial use of an expanded Advent, please be in touch by e-mail (see Participate and Contact Us).

— William H. Petersen