Advent and idolatry
A sermon

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The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year, so it would be appropriate to greet each other today with the recognition that a new year has begun. Among other things, doing so would remind us that Christian time is different from other ways of marking time. But we have not given each other new year's greetings today, so we are reminded instead that we generally live our lives according to a movement of time that is at odds with the church's time. I suspect the everyday texture of our lives is determined as much by temporal markers such as Black Friday as by Advent. It is no wonder we find ourselves confused. At least I'm confused. And I make no promise to be able to undo that confusion. If anything, today's lectionary texts (Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19; Isa. 64:1–9; 1 Cor. 1:3–9; and Mark 13:24–37) might add to our confusion by challenging some of our customary ways of understanding the season of Advent.

Advent is the most Jewish of Christian seasons. Yet we approach it in a way that strips it of its Jewish character, and we end up with a version of Christianity at odds with itself.

Let me begin by summarizing the general contours of what I want to say in a way that might seem counterintuitive: the first and most basic point is that Advent is the most Jewish of Christian seasons. As Rowan Williams puts it, "In Advent . . . we all become . . . Jews once more."[1] Yet we are accustomed to approaching Advent in a way that strips it of its Jewish character, and we end up with a version of Christianity that is somehow fundamentally at odds with itself. That is to say, we end up with a church that is insufficiently Christian precisely because it is not properly Jewish. And if such a church is at odds with itself, that is paradoxically so because its identity has become far too clear, too pure, too smooth, too neat and tidy. In other words, it is at odds with itself precisely because it is not sufficiently at odds with itself.

A church that has lost a sense of the Jewish character of Advent loses the ability to wrestle with a particular set of tensions and ambiguities essential to its being the church. When Christianity came to define itself over against Judaism, more than anything else it lost a robust sense of the messianic. Christianity's identification of Jesus as the Messiah has all too often had the effect of initiating an erasure of the very concept of messiah. By *messianic*, I mean to point to a sense of radical interruption—an inversion of the "laws" of history, a revolutionary change that undoes and transforms the ways we have become accustomed to thinking and acting. It is this sense of interruption and revolutionary change that gives rise to the tensions and ambiguities I spoke of earlier. I will say more about this in a moment. For now, I want to suggest that all of this has to do with how we conceive of the relationship between Advent and Christmas. Let me try to explain.

What are we waiting for?

We think of Advent as a season of waiting. We speak of it by invoking notions of preparation and expectation, of anticipation and longing. This is appropriate: Advent names an expectation of an event that is to come. It is a preparation for an arrival that we are still waiting for. But things start to get interesting and difficult when we ask questions like these: What are we waiting for, and why do we wait? How are we to prepare for this event that is to come? What does our longing and expectation look like? What shape does it take? What sort of posture does this waiting require?

The starting point from which we must attempt to answer these questions is, of course, the recognition that Advent is a time of preparation and waiting for Jesus, the Messiah. But I'm struck by how easy it is to think about this season in ways that minimize, even cancel out, a sense of the messianic character that is necessary if Jesus is to be what we Christians confess him to be. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of preparation and expectation in terms of one coming who is known in advance of his arrival. We cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of the Messiah as someone we will surely recognize. And we cancel out the logic of the messianic when we think of Advent as preparing for something that *we* are striving for, a longing for something that *we* are responsible to bring about.

But this approach is exactly what today's Old Testament texts warn us against. Notice that they both emphasize the anger of God. They plead with God not to be angry—even though God has every right to be angry. The psalmist asks, "O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" (Ps. 80:4).[2] Isaiah appeals to God: "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever" (Isa. 64:9). Another way to put it is that these texts involve confession: "We have sinned." They turn on a recognition of Israel's transgression and need for restoration.

Why are the people in need of restoration?

Why is God angry? Why are the people of Israel in need of restoration? They are in need of restoration because they have taken their future into their own hands. They have tried to reach God. They have become impatient. They have forgotten that their very existence rests on their being chosen, called out from the nations. They have forgotten that God comes to God's people, not the other way around. They have, in short, failed to let God be God. Isaiah in particular is clear about this reality. He emphasizes the fact that God arrives in ways we do not expect: "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him" (Isa. 64:3–4).

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Notice the points of emphasis here: God's deeds are unexpected. God comes down. God works for those who wait. We cannot see or hear any God but God. Or rather, when we try to see or hear God, we can be reasonably confident that it is not God whom we will see or hear. This is why we are to wait for God to come to us: if we rush to meet God, we invariably find something other than God. Paul's letter to the Corinthians echoes a similar theme: "God is faithful; *by him* you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9; my italics). And the reading from the Gospel according to Mark also reflects this conviction:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:32–33).

The danger is us.

I am struck by the sense of danger here. Do we see Advent as a dangerous time? I suspect most of us do not. But here we are being told to beware, keep alert, and be watchful. Apparently danger is lurking. And it seems that the danger is us, and it is linked to the fact that our knowledge is not nearly as secure as we think it is. More than anything else, we are confronted with the fact of our apparently intractable human capacity for self-deception.

As we enter into the time of expectation that is Advent, we are first of all confronted with our sinfulness: We yearn for a messiah whom we will recognize. We want a messiah who reflects what we would identify as best about ourselves. We long for a messiah who seems familiar, someone we feel like we know. But our scripture passages today seem to cut in exactly the opposite direction. This is why Advent is dangerous: because it all too easily turns into a longing for and anticipation of the Jesus we think we've got figured out. It is exactly for this reason that we are called to beware, remain watchful, and keep alert.

We tend to think of Advent as a time when we gradually come closer to God, a God who comes to us in human form in Jesus. But Advent begins by confronting us with the anger of God. If these passages underscore anything, it is God's distance or difference from us. The emphasis is not on a God with whom we are becoming increasingly familiar but on a God who remains exceedingly strange. So it is in a spirit of confession that we come to this season. Advent is a time of preparation that requires us to confess our tendency to forget God or to turn God into something familiar. Advent as the most Jewish of Christian seasons in the sense that it brings us face to face with our seemingly insatiable desire to erect idols. It is Jewish because it reminds us that our expectations will not be straightforwardly satisfied; we will not get the messiah we think we are waiting for. It is Jewish because it emphasizes that God remains beyond our knowledge. It is Jewish because it reflects a longing that in some sense remains frustrated and endlessly deferred.

We often think of Advent as a sort of bridge we must traverse in order to arrive, once again, at that site of holiness called Christmas. We see Advent as a time when we move ever nearer to the presence of God; the direction of movement is from us to God. But this view gets it exactly the wrong way around. It turns the logic of the messianic inside out. The lectionary readings we have heard today suggest that God is not something we reach, even when we do our best to get things right, even when we strive to be our holiest. Rather, the idea of the messianic is that God comes to us—and in so doing radically transforms our way of being and thinking. Here Advent names a divine movement that interrupts and reorients us. If it names an expectation, it is of an event that will be explosive and disruptive—and thus profoundly unexpected.

Let us reimagine Advent as a hollowing out that makes us ready to receive the gift that Christmas has to give—the unexpected gift of a Messiah who comes to save us from the temptation that we must somehow save ourselves.

How do we prepare?

How do we go about preparing for an Advent like this? I don't have a ready answer. And I think the point is that none of us does. But at the least, an Advent like this seems to require a change in how we think about preparation. We often think of preparation as a gradual filling up, a process of addition or accumulation, a progressive unfolding that moves ever forward. Think, for example, of how we prepare for an exam—by filling our minds with the knowledge we might reasonably be expected to deliver. Here we are presented with a different image of preparation. It is not so much a filling up as an emptying. It is a matter not of addition but of subtraction. It is a negative—perhaps even nihilistic—moment more than one that is positive or progressive, because the Messiah comes as much to defy our expectations as to satisfy them.

This is why Advent is so important: because it serves to remind us that we have made Jesus all too familiar, perhaps even idolatrous. It reorients us to his profound strangeness. To quote Rowan Williams once again, it is "a way of learning again that God is God: that between even our deepest and holiest longing and the reality of God is a gap which only grace can cross."[3]

North American Christians tend to approach Advent from the perspective of Christmas. We think that the point of Advent is to focus our gaze on the event of Jesus' arrival. This is no doubt because our lives are governed so much by metaphors of progress and accumulation. But Advent ceases to be Advent when it is overdetermined by Christmas; the meaning of Advent requires us to let our gaze be turned the other way around. And perhaps Christmas can only be Christmas if we can somehow unlearn what we think we know about it. The peculiarly Jewish character of Advent that we are wont to forget reminds us that we must unlearn the Jesus we think we know so that Jesus can come to us as Messiah.

We tend to forget that the season of Advent has as much to do with the second coming of Jesus as with his birth in Bethlehem. And this forgetfulness is yet another symptom of how Christianity has abandoned the Jewish character of Advent. But without the Jewishness of Advent, we are left with a most unchristian conception of Christmas. So let us reimagine Advent as a kind of self-emptying, a hollowing out so that we can become ready to receive the gift that Christmas has to give—the unexpected gift of a Messiah who comes to save us from the temptation that we must somehow save ourselves.

Notes

[1] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 5.
[2] All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.
[3] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 6.

About the author

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