



# Advent-Christmas: The Education of Desire

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**A**dvent-Christmas, the liturgical season stretching from the first Sunday of December to the Feast of Epiphany—and in some traditions to the Baptism of the Lord—is observed by the Christian church as a “sanctification of time.” It is set in a social-cultural season, however, that, while springing from sacred time, serves more and more as distraction and can well be antithetical to that time and its purpose. Liturgical time attends to divine coming—then, now, and always—but it doesn’t make much of a splash in the thundering rapids of the holiday economic surge. While preachers still warn against getting caught up in the monetary whirl and urge us to keep the sacred season, or the season sacred, everyone knows that we, the faithful, will be shopping to relentlessly cheery “holiday” music, and our neighbors will be tacking up their Christmas lights before Thanksgiving. Our children will need angel costumes, or cupcakes with sprinkles, and will make lists for Santa, in close consultation with their friends. For adults, to-do lists in every category of holiday observance keep growing, accumulating, and overwhelming. We long to get everything right.

We know, however, that Advent-Christmas is actually about another kind of longing, about acknowledging our spiritual neediness, about divesting and emptying, making space for the One who comes. Observing a holy season in the midst of unholy materialism brings us to the predicament of resisting, balancing, or surren-

*We observe Advent and Christmas in a sinful world that offers things we think we cannot live without. But God comes to transform our desires, to cause us to long for God and Christ—coming to us in the surprise of the ordinary.*

dering to the culture and experiencing a certain queasy discomfort that our balancing act isn't working. While human desire has become tangled in the giving and receiving of love, in wanting versus needing, in gift-giving and procuring and expecting, we struggle to remember that God put it all in motion, desiring our salvation, pursuing us in love, and giving us the gift beyond all others, Jesus, joy of our desiring. Perhaps it is possible to respond to both attractions, both desires—divine and human.

God the giver is endlessly tolerant of our tangles, knowing the depth of human desire in its turnings, and honoring the preciousness of human loving sprung from divine love. We are to enjoy what is given. God's love for us and its logic is vastly out of proportion, "more than we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20), and can prevail over all the layers of distraction we wrap it in. We can enter the whirl, enjoy the lights, buy the gifts, and still keep our eyes open. "See!" "Watch!" That's the first call of the season. For love is always coming, here among us.

#### THE MUSIC OF HOLY DESIRE

"Savior of the nations, come! Come quickly, King of Kings. Dear savior, haste! Dispel the night, and show your face! Come, thou long-expected Jesus. O come, O come Emmanuel, ransom captive Israel."

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The weeks of Advent are filled with the urgent singing of God's people. We plead for the Christ to come. We remind each other, "Heads up! Watch, be ready, stay awake, light your lamps." We sing as if to awaken God; boldly, fired by our yearning, we hold God to the promise that all will be made new. We sing in metaphor, woven with the dreams of the prophets, rich in images from Scripture, the words in torrents, struggling to describe our situation: darkness, gloom, desert, war, sin, sickness, chains, exile—the agony sung in the bass clef, pounding out our woes for God's ears. Then our dreams soar into treble, and again we reach for poetry, the best that we have to approximate our hope of salvation: sprouting and flowering, laughter and singing, trumpets and cymbals, rivers and springs, a new dawn, a world at peace, the banquet of the Lamb. We sing to enchant God, the Creator, with the beauty of creation and to galvanize God, the speaker of the word, with the potency of language. It's a long scriptural tradition: flattery is good.

Advent-Christmas-Epiphany is an intricately woven season, its colors and textures complex, its mysteries both dark and bright. We begin with the end, the coming in glory, and end with the beginning, the Savior's birth into poverty, while throughout we pivot on the central message, the wonders of God's love for human-

kind. We marvel at the incarnation of the Promised One, as we groan that the promise is not yet accomplished among us. A million hearts cry for solace, for justice, for the bare essentials of life, and even the countless communities of fervent belief and dedicated action that labor to respond to the vastness of need don't seem to diminish the darkness. Advent voices the yearning for the triumph of the Christ, when sin and sorrow will flee away. And simultaneously, Advent calls us to God's vision, while still in tears we sing: "Wake, awake, for night is flying! Prepare the way of the Lord! Comfort my people! Strengthen the weary! The time is near! Rejoice!"

#### HUMAN DESIRE: THE STILL, THE DEEP, THE COMPROMISED

"O little town of Bethlehem...." Picture Bethlehem, the Bethlehem rendered on countless Christmas cards. We view a distant cluster of buildings, a silhouette in dim light, across a plain, nestled under a deep midnight sky, lit by a glittering star whose silver beams point the way for shepherds and wise men. Our Christmas songs and carols elaborate: a midnight clear, deep and dreamless sleep, a world in solemn stillness, a winter night, a silent night, a holy night, a half-spent night, O night divine. There is a romance to that greeting card: all is still, waiting, dark, welcoming.

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Why can't our hearts be still and deep like that Bethlehem? We would like to offer our Savior that quiet darkness and restful peace within our hearts, to mirror that idyllic scene in our own desire, to be receptive and welcoming. In the *chronos* of our daily doings, we may notice small spaces like that, a momentary awareness, a fleeting receptivity, but there is so much to deal with, so much noise and distraction, along with a puzzling reluctance to pause in our own quiet company. We wish for a soft, dark peace, a deep velvety silence, a space of soul to reflect, pray, welcome the Word. We have, however, no ideal resting place for ourselves or God. Perhaps the best of it may be a "parking-lot" darkness. Nothing soft about it—there's glare, an artificial half-light, a shopping center outlined against a sky we cannot see, effectively obliterating any twinkles from the heavens. If there were a star, how would we know?

Our parking-lot darkness is so unspiritual, so unappealing, an undesirable sort of desire, surely not a place to bid God welcome. This is our Advent: noisy, unsettled, distracted, and impatient. Acres of half-shadowed parking lots, and we are circling, searching for a parking space, on an overload of *chronos*. We want the right kind of desire, properly ordered, emptied of our pettier wants, more adult, more worthy. Our desire for God seems to be so shallow, so capricious, so frenetic.

But this is it, the real, the only waiting-in-darkness we have, and if we are loathe to accept it as a ready place for God, we haven't been listening to the Christmas story. Holding out for more focus, more peace, we are going to miss the coming. *Kairos* is always a surprise, never what we thought we were hoping for. The Word made flesh rarely merits a proper birthing suite. There are two weary travelers, teenagers, and her labor pains have begun, and he is frantic. Nobody offers a welcome or a helping hand, and they are waved off to the stable, not a comfort to be found.

Parking-lot darkness. A barn, not an inn. But here is the wondrous gift of incarnation: God takes flesh anyway, in Bethlehem, in Baghdad, in Kmart. God comes to us not because we are ready, or have gotten our desires straight. God comes in Jesus, out of the *ecstasis*, the overflowing love of the Trinity, with a divine desire for our healing, our salvation, and our own transformation into living Words. We are born craving this coming. In a sinful world, however, our need for God disguises itself early and comes to the front of the line as a desire for a variety of things that we think we cannot live without, and then more. We know the litany. We are hobbled spiritually by things we desire and haven't gotten—yet—and by other desires we've filled but that have not satisfied us. We suspect God of wanting to strip everything away. We cannot bear a God who will not be controlled and used. Baby Jesus is just the right size—or so we think.

“Our part in this life,” writes Simon Tugwell, “is to learn to want largely and earnestly enough to make us capable of the infinite righteousness of God’s kingdom. It is no good coming with a thimble....God has nothing less to give us than everything....And it is in vain to plead that it is too big for us. Of course it is too big for us. But we are all the same made for that which is too big for us.”<sup>1</sup>

## GOD’S DESIRE

We assume our desire is first. We find ourselves needing and wanting from the first moment, when, newborn, we are spanked into breath, crying our need for air.

We experience ourselves as unfinished, unfree, with the desire for salvation described by Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”<sup>2</sup> We are made in the image and likeness of God, who is burning with desire for us, a desire that is not emptiness, but fullness, and whose desire—for fullness of life and oneness for all, and the gathering of all in the great everlasting feast—is one of the attributes we are created and blessed with. This desire, twisted by sin into a craving, a dark hole in our hearts, haunts us, and God’s enduring love recreates it into holy desire. Catherine of Siena calls God a “mad lover”:

O immeasurable generosity! O eternal, infinite Good! O mad lover! And you have need of your creature? It seems so to me, for you act as if you could not live

<sup>1</sup>Simon Tugwell, *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Tradition* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1980) 79.

<sup>2</sup>Translations of St. Augustine’s famous quotation vary. The words are in the prayer with which he begins Book 1 of his *Confessions* (1.1.1).

without her, in spite of the fact that you are Life itself, and everything has life from you....Why then are you so mad? Because you have fallen in love with what you have made!...You clothed yourself in our humanity, and nearer than that you could not have come.<sup>3</sup>

This is mystical metaphor. A needy God is not our theological conception of the perfection of divinity, yet the biblical prophets experienced and communicated passionately and tenderly what Abraham Heschel has called divine *pathos*, God's yearning after humankind.<sup>4</sup> God has sought after us through the ages. God initiates. Calls and calls. And as we call on God, we are only echoing that divine call—a need that is also a great joy, a pull, a hunger that can never be and is always being filled: for all to be brought together in a salvation we cannot even imagine, where we will enter into the great giving and pour out our lives in gladness.

#### THE CELEBRATION OF DESIRE

Christmas, especially the Advent-to-Epiphany season as we now know it, was not celebrated for some time in the life of the early church. Sunday was the original Day of Resurrection, and within a century Easter became a yearly observance. The birth of the Lord appears on a Roman list of feasts of martyrs from the first third of the fourth century, and the feast arose and gathered meaning, historians propose, in several different ways: from the need to claim for Christ the pagan celebrations of the winter solstice, which observed the yearly dying and rising of the Unconquered Sun; the calculation of Jesus' conception and birth, based on the popular belief that Christ died on the same day he was conceived (at some point set at March 25, Feast of the Annunciation). Eventually, there was some trading back and forth of celebrations and meanings with the church of the East, which combined several facets of the incarnation and manifestation in Epiphany, instead of the day of Christmas. In East and West, Easter remained the greatest festival, echoed in the liturgies of Sunday, which was not the day of sabbath rest but the "Lord's Day," the day the Lord rose from death, the "day the Lord has made," the Eighth Day, when all is fulfilled and Christ comes in glory, and the Holy Spirit renews the face of the earth.

All the liturgical seasons are thus grounded in the Easter event and are ultimately dependent on the paschal mystery for their meaning. Christmas is another view of Jesus' pasch, drawing us into a homely scene edged with surprise, joy, and wonder. It is Act I of the *kenosis*, the pouring out of divinity and God's passing over into humanity. We stand before a manger scene. It does not unsettle us the way other events later in the gospels might. We've seen, starred in, and directed countless Christmas plays, fashioned crooks for the shepherds, wrestled with the challenge of portraying, or obtaining, the friendly beasts. We lean toward Christmas as

<sup>3</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980) 325.

<sup>4</sup>Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 1–58, 269–272.

a celebration for children, an association eagerly underscored in popular culture and advertising. Children understand the Baby Jesus, asleep in the hay. They like acting out the story. They can at some level grasp God's giving, can sing about giving from our heart, of time and talent, "pa-rum-pum-pum-pum." But at its heart the feast of Christmas is neither cute nor child-centered.

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The infancy narrative, from the angel Gabriel's "Ave Maria" to Simeon's troubling "Nunc Dimittis," brings the incarnation-paschal mystery event grindingly to earth. This enfleshment is truly the *kenosis* of Jesus, and, aside from the wondrous vision of angels and the expensive gifts of the mysterious foreigners, there is not much dazzle or splendor. He comes, as do we all, in water and blood and pain, and he will die in the same way. The wooden manger is crib and cross. The swaddling clothes will be the wrappings of burial. The stable is an outbuilding, a place for animals, and young Joseph and Mary in labor are the unwanted and the outcast. There was no room for him. Mary and Joseph are new parents, participants in pain and fear at their first birthing. The shepherds are the unclean, the outer ring, the ones who will consistently hear and respond to Jesus' preaching of the reign of God, receive his healing and his mercy, and share meals with him. The magi bring frankincense and myrrh, "bitter perfume," the spices for preparing a body for burial. And the friendly beasts that appear in our traditional manger scene? The donkey will return with the "Hosannas" of the entry into Jerusalem. Jesus will be the Lamb, slain.

#### THE SCRIPTURES OF THE SEASON: WORDS OF DESIRE

Every Advent, we hear the scriptural expressions of desire, and the comfort and the challenges brought by the prophets. We are urged to patience and hope and upright living, aware that the coming could be any moment. We sing of our longing hearts, of promises and fulfillment. We hear a peremptory call: Repent! And there is our desiring, in all its complexity and set in today's world with its modern problems. There is the holiday season here and now with its demands and its delights, and the temptation to forget. What does "then" have to say to "now"? How shall we bring our desires to words? How shall we discern among them? How shall the Word speak to our desires? Below is a short review of some of the desires the seasonal Scriptures express, and suggestions of here and now questions and protests we might bring.

*Advent 1.* We desire peace, in the midst of hatred, war, and division. Peace in our hearts. Will God be light to us, home, the center of our lives? Do we really want

that to happen? Are we ready? We desire a changed world, a sharing of plentitude, a world where God is center and all can bask in God's light and walk God's path, beat swords into plowshares. Wake up! Be aware! Be ready, because the coming of the Son of Man is to happen in an ordinary moment; and attend, for your "mean-while" pulses with promise.

*Advent 2.* We long for the promised reign. Dare we hope? Will the Just One come, a strong and honest leader, bringing justice and healing, to gather a fractious people? Will God respond to the cries of the poor and the outcast? Will God banish our fear of each other? The prophet encourages: a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse, the Promised One will come, bringing a new age of salvation to a people and a creation not yet redeemed. He comes bearing the gifts of the Spirit, and his light will shine beyond Israel, for all. For us? Can this be true, here and now? We're still waiting.

*Advent 3.* Where are we headed? Who knows the way? Will God's word lead us? Will God bring us home? Is God's way, God's guidance, here for us now, or do we live and die in hope of a promise not yet realized? Is there truly healing for those who are blind, deaf, lame? The letter of James urges a beloved community to support each other in patient waiting, as did the prophets of old (James 5:7–8). We desire the shared faith and love of others. Is the Christ among us? Even John the Baptist cannot be sure. From prison he asks: Are you the one? Jesus uses the words of the prophet Isaiah. See. Believe. Healing is happening. Where? How? Or is it all future tense?

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*Advent 4.* To God: Are you here? With us? We desire surety, safety, control. Plans A, B, and C. What do you mean, rely on you? Why can't you be clearer? Our need for presence is tangible. Ahaz, bent on making alliances that will prove treacherous for Israel, will not ask God for a sign. The prophet warns Ahaz that in God alone is to be found security: Emmanuel, God-with-us (Isa 7:14). Paul declares Jesus the Christ to be the fulfillment of the ancient promises, Son of David and Son of God through his resurrection. Paul's preaching and the amazing response of faith from his hearers are signs that God has kept the promise. A gospel word of hope: an angel comes to comfort a confused Joseph, announcing God's guidance and protection. There is a plan. And you shall name him Jesus.

*Christmas.* The messenger announces salvation and the reign of God. Are we amazed? Shall we sing? We desire joy and wonder, long for God's powerful love to enfold us and delight us. We desire salvation, but aren't sure where to find it. What should we be looking for? Is this all—are you truly with us in this baby, the least of

us, born in an outbuilding, no help to be found? What possible answer to our yearnings will you provide by taking on human flesh? We long for so much: for security, for health, for forgiveness, for love, and for reasons to get up in the morning. Dare we allow ourselves to rejoice? Will there be peace on earth? Are we, like the shepherds, to announce the wondrous news?

*Epiphany.* This feast tells the story of the coming of the three kings, or wise men, mysterious visitors who have followed the star to find the infant king. The writer of Ephesians speaks of the hidden mystery to be proclaimed to the Gentiles, that Jesus is light to all the nations. “Let there be light.” God’s first speech. Life for all that lives and grows. We crave light on a number of levels. What light do we seek? Enlighten us, we plead. Help us to see. Where is our guiding star? Are we able to follow God’s light where it goes? Are we able to welcome outsiders? To accept God’s love for and desire to call all people, every race and class and belief, even people who wage war on us, terrorists, criminals, people we wouldn’t want to associate with? God desires to gather the whole world, invites us to widen our own boundaries. “Arise, shine,” begins Isa 60. Do we desire to share our lights? How shall God enlighten the world through us?

#### THE PRACTICE OF HOLY DESIRE

We light the Advent wreath and we pray “Come.” What do we want of God? Can we bring prayers for our needs and the needs of the world? What would be the best gift God could give the world this year?

As Advent reminds us of our desires for the gifts of God, we also hear of God’s desires, brought in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection: salvation for us, saving love—and the desire to spread the good news. How do we announce God’s coming daily into our communities? How are we God’s living Words, God’s Word made flesh?

Waiting in line is a sure sign of the season and an Advent reminder: How do we wait? Are we impatient, snappish, resigned? Thoughtful, helpful, friendly, amused?

Why is gift-giving a practice at Christmastime? We give presents to one another to show our love, to bring joy. But what if we didn’t have money, or stores to buy things from? What sort of gift could we give someone we love—a gift of self, a talent, a service?

We can learn to see God in all the sacred-turned-secular lights, decorations, parties, gift exchanges, and cards. We can delight in transformation: a decorated house, the sparkle, the renewal of family ties and friendship, the special rituals of the season, the telling of the story, the singing of carols, service to others, and gratitude for what we receive, gratitude for all the small blessings, the invisible grace.

On any given day—in line at the grocery store, chatting while exercising, sharing a meal, driving the kids around, and, yes, circling in a parking lot—may we allow God to pull us a bit more into the circle of divine giving, God’s grace, so that



we, doing a bit of overflowing ourselves, show our identity as the body of Christ in the world. Awake! See! Come! Gather! Adore! Sing! Bring! Share! Love! Become! Here in this place, this small world, is where God's desires and ours meet: what we want of God and God of us. Here is salvation. Now is the time. ⊕

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