

Christmas Hymns in Advent? Yes, We Need to Connect with the Culture

MARC KOLDEN

Context isn't everything, but it is important nonetheless. While the logic of the Church year *begins* each season with the chief holy day (Christmas Day followed by the Christmas season, Ash Wednesday followed by Lent, Easter Sunday followed by the Easter season), the human psyche seems to apportion the time differently, with a period of anticipation prior to the chief holiday followed by a period of appreciation for it. Anticipation and preparation heighten the importance of the holy day itself and do not detract from the period that follows, as far as I can see.

While aspects of the societal context for Advent and Christmas rightly are criticized for their consumerist frenzy and lack of Christian content, the common rhythms of human creatures (Christians and others) may indicate the Christian value of anticipation, preparation, and hope—things that existed long before the commodification of Christmas. If the church seeks to suppress all reference to Christmas in worship prior to December 24, out of adherence to the liturgical calendar, I think we will miss important positive connections to our context.

If we don't sing Christmas carols before Christmas, we surrender much of the message of Christmas to the secular culture, which inevitably turns Christmas into nostalgia—chiefly through its music (“There’s No Place Like Home for the Holidays,” “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” etc.). And with society’s shortening of the (post-) Christmas season to less than a week in favor of “Bowl Season” (football on TV from late December through early February), the church loses even the traditional twelve days of Christmas. By waiting until December 24, we deprive our own members of the religious meaning of Christmas contained not only in carols but also in more classical Christmas music, in which the incredible self-emptying of God for the salvation of the world is set forth in the praise and remembrance of the promises fulfilled in the incarnation of the Son of God. Without rejecting the secular carols, Christians can provide more profound and future-looking words and melodies to help people focus even prior to

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Christmas Hymns in Advent? No, We Are Not the Chapel of the Culture

PAUL WESTERMEYER

Though somewhat less frequently, the question still is asked: Why not sing Christmas hymns in Advent? It's clear why this question arises for this season. From Thanksgiving or earlier, Christmas decorations go up in shopping malls. With them Christmas carols or their imitations are heard wherever sound is piped in. If the culture as a whole hears Christmas carols as part of its marketing strategy for a couple months before the New Year, why not sing them in church at the same time? This is a good idea if the church is the chapel of the culture. But just there is the rub: the church is not the chapel of the culture.

Neil Alexander, as a young Lutheran pastor, was preaching on the first Sunday in Advent. He spoke of Advent themes: judgment, end times, Christ's sovereignty, and the second advent. Then, turning toward Bethlehem, he said "that we did not need to play these 'waiting games' because we knew already how the story was going to come out." After church, when everyone else had departed, a "dear parishioner" said to him privately, "Thank you, Pastor, for ruining Advent and Christmas for me. Waiting for the Lord may be a game for you, Pastor, but for me, Pastor, it is an act of faith."¹

That "dear parishioner" tells us why singing Christmas carols in Advent is not a good idea. Several reasons are embedded in his reproof to Neil Alexander.

(1) The church year is an important way the church remembers major Christian themes. The church has understood that some communal discipline is necessary to help us remember the whole story. Otherwise we'll emphasize what may appeal to us at the moment and forget the rest. The church year has served as a central part of this discipline.

One of the ways these themes are powerfully expressed and remembered at worship is in the church's hymnody. That is why many hymns focus on specific themes that fit particular seasons of the church year. To sing Christmas hymns in Advent is to omit Advent or at least to truncate it and the fullness of the story.

(2) Advent, like Lent, is partly about the church's profound sensitivity to the

¹J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1993) 5.

December 24 on those meanings of Christmas that transcend the hoopla of Christmas in North America.

I love Advent. I love Advent hymns. But most of them aren't about Christ's birth, or even preparation for it. They are about his second coming (his second "advent"). They are about our eschatological hope established through the events of his first coming—in the flesh. These "last things" too are something to sing about, but not as preparation for Christmas or in competition with it. Here we should allow the context to play a role in the way the church inhabits the liturgical year.

For example, as the end of the church year draws near each November, culminating around the time of Thanksgiving, the themes of the second and final coming of Christ already have begun in the assigned Scripture readings. Some of the Advent hymns fit best when sung during the two or three weeks *prior* to Advent and then perhaps for the first two Sundays of Advent.* In that way, we wouldn't shortchange Advent music but could still begin singing Christmas hymns and carols in worship by December 15 or so; thus we would not miss the positive aspects of our context that welcome them by then, if not sooner. Doing this also would serve congregational members who will spend Christmas in other places by allowing them to sing Christmas songs with their own congregations. And let's face it, Christmas choir concerts almost always take place during the time prior to Christmas already. Why fight this? Let's make the most of it.

Christmas carols are one of the church's secret weapons: Christ-centered proclamation that is already known and loved by many of the very people Christ came to call but who have not yet believed. Sometimes the wind is blowing in the right direction. Perhaps this is one of those times. ⊕

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*Think of Advent hymns such as "Hark, The Glad Sound," "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?" "Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers," "Hark! A Thrilling Voice is Sounding!" "Comfort, Comfort Now My People," "Fling Wide the Door," "The King Shall Come," "Prepare the Royal Highway," "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending," and "Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying" as hymns that clearly speak of Christ's return, not his birth.

rhythms of life in this world. The church has embraced day and night, weekly patterns, and seedtime and harvest in its worship, but it has done this so that their penultimate character is rolled into the more ultimate content of the themes of the faith. For example, the English play on words gives us Christ both as Sun and Son. Christians have utilized this linguistic feature to express how Christ infuses the rhythm of our days and nights.

A similar move relates to seasonal rhythms. Here there is a central recognition about fasting and feasting: you can't have a feast without a fast. This stands against the culture's practice. The culture, largely driven by strategies of selling, begins an orgy around Thanksgiving and winds up with many people depressed at Christmas and the New Year when they can no longer force the feast. The church says there's a healthier way. First have a fast, and then you'll be able to feast. Not only fast, but remember that you're waiting on God while you do it.

At Advent the church "waits" for the coming of Christ who has come and will come again. It waits between these times in fasting mixed with restrained rejoicing; then it feasts at Christmas by celebrating the incarnation with the joy such waiting and fasting make possible. It does this in large measure with hymns—hymns in Advent that express the waiting between the times and lead to hymns at Christmas that celebrate the incarnation. To omit or truncate part of this sequence is to undercut the whole thing.

(3) Now, as Neil Alexander learned from his parishioner, "Of course we live on this side of the cradle, this side of the cross, but as decisive as these events are for our salvation, they do not exhaust what it means to *wait on the Lord* and long for the day of his coming." That is, "It is not a matter of waiting for things to happen, but a matter of what happens *to us*—to you and to me."²

Waiting for the Lord is not a seasonal matter. It infuses the whole Christian life. But Christians at their worship in community have to emphasize it somewhere, or it will be forgotten. It can't be emphasized everywhere equally strongly because then other themes will be forgotten. As finite creatures we can't read the whole Bible every time we assemble for worship. We have to read parts of it piece by piece across time. We also have to remember the themes of the faith piece by piece across time, simply because we can't remember them all at one crunch. The church year helps us do that. Hymns for various seasons help us do that. And that's why singing Advent hymns at Advent, just like singing Easter hymns at Easter, is a good idea.³ ⊕

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²Ibid.

³At least at the worship of the church. College choirs, because of their academic calendars, have little choice but to include Christmas music with Advent music before Christmas. Otherwise they will never sing it. Congregations in their worship don't have that problem.