

Advent, a Season of Anticipation

The Tennessean, 12/8/07

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The lyrics to my favorite Christmas carol are “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!” But rather than joy, the scripture and hymns for the church season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, have a hint of longing and yearning. Because unlike Christmas, Advent is not a time of birth narratives and Christmas carols. Instead, it is about the expectancy heard in hymns like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and the Gospel sermons of John the Baptizer. So instead of fulfillment, the season of Advent instills a yearning for that which is too good to be true. But one of the scriptures read in communities of faith during Advent is *Isaiah*, poetry which recaptures hope in the midst of hopelessness. *Isaiah* has been called the “fifth Gospel,” and the “Gospel of the Old Testament.” We recognize the words of *Isaiah* in the lyrics for much of Handel’s *Messiah*. With *Isaiah*, the season of Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations, and to consider life afresh in anticipation. The words of *Isaiah*, which we hear each Advent season, cause us to reflect back on the anticipation of God’s coming to a community of faith 2000 years ago.

Before the first Christmas, God’s coming was feared by some as was a physically or verbally abusive landlord. But *Isaiah* and the Gospels suggest an alternative vision. And *Isaiah* and the Gospels turn the world upside down! They suggest God comes to us not as an enormous military conqueror, whose presence and judgment is to be feared, but instead as a small baby in a feeding tray for animals. They suggest God does not come to us in huge, boastful, physical strength, but in the weakness of a small package. Born in a tiny humble package, God comes to rule over all with love, tumbling down the walls of hostility which divide us. Poor in things of the world, we see in a little infant the wealth of God’s grace. Rejected and overlooked by innkeepers, we see in the humble housing of a tiny child that all are welcome, smelly shepherds and strange astronomers alike. Yes, Advent reflects back on the anticipation of God’s coming to a community of faith 2000 years ago. But the season of Advent also looks forward.

The future “second coming” means different things to different communities of faith. One tradition is that 2000 years ago, God came once and for all, but not all at once! That is, God comes to us a little every day. For God comes to us in small packages. Comes to us each day as tiny blessings, little smiles, and small words of encouragement. Small things we experience every day but tend to reject and overlook. Reject and overlook as did the innkeepers and local rulers of 2000 years ago. If only we had the eyes to see and the ears to hear! When we open the **eyes** and **ears** of our hearts, and make room in the **inns** of our hearts for the anticipation of God’s daily coming, we can at last remove our yoke. The yoke of our exhaustion, loneliness, fear, despair, bitterness, and the false feeling of being subject to fate. We are saved **by** God, **from** brokenness, **for** worshipping God **through** service to others.

In the season of Advent, the community of faith anticipates the coming of God. *Isaiah* sets the stage for the anticipation of the Advent season, and its fulfillment on Christmas Day. Anticipation satisfied with a birth in a manger 2000 years ago, once and for all but not all at once. A satisfaction our opened hearts can receive not just each and every **Christmas**, but also each and every **day**. A satisfaction and fulfillment we can receive with eagerness and joy. **O come, O come, Emmanuel!**