

“For the Love of Advent”
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What is Advent? I will confess that I did not know what Advent was until about four years ago, not really anyways. In my ignorance, I certainly didn't know why people would love it, what meaning it held for their lives. Nor did I have any idea what it had to teach us about love. But at Yale Divinity School, where I went to seminary, Advent is a really big deal, so I learned quickly.

In simple terms, Advent is the season in the Christian calendar that leads up to Christmas. Much like Lent is the period of waiting before Easter, Advent is the period of waiting before Christmas. It is a penitential season, a season of preparing oneself for what is to come. Historically, it meant fasting, which maybe seems inconceivable in this the season of cookies and eggnog.

During the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, when the Catholic Church reformed much of their teaching and practice, there was a shift to focusing on Advent as a season of expectant hope. They wanted to distinguish Advent from Lent, but didn't go so far as to make it a non-penitential season. So it remains a time for waiting and preparing, for slowing down and reflecting, but nothing is given up. It became a season for hope, for expectantly awaiting Christmas.

But what is Christmas about? I taught Sunday school to kindergarteners at a UCC congregation during grad school, and I asked my students this very question. A few of them not surprisingly said Christmas was about presents, one rather pointedly said that Christmas was about getting money, but eventually we got to the answer I was fishing for. Christmas,

in the Christian tradition, is the day Jesus was born. Now, that may or may not hold any significance to you personally. But to understand this season of waiting and preparation, we need to have some working understanding of what is expected.

In my efforts to understand Advent I asked my friends a whole host of questions. For instance, who is Emmanuel, and why are we beckoning him towards us? Deductive reasoning would suggest that Christmas songs are often, though not always, about Jesus being born, so Emmanuel is probably another name for Jesus. But why?

As a friend kindly explained to me, Emmanuel means “God with us.” In the Hebrew, “immanu” means “with us” and “el” means God. So referring to Jesus as Emmanuel is to say that in him the human and the divine are unified.

To sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” as we did in our first hymn is a call for the holy to be with us in this world.

Let’s take this concept of Emmanuel a few steps farther. Because without an understanding of what the birth of Jesus means for Christian theology, Advent becomes a thing of wreaths and chocolate calendars, a countdown to a shopping deadline. And in truth the story of Christmas is radical and subversive and life giving. But to get there we need to understand what’s happening with Jesus’s birth both theologically and contextually.

We’re going to take a brief look into the nature of the trinity: father, son, and Holy Spirit. And I want to recognize that talking about the trinity in a UU congregation is unusual. But let’s see if it can be helpful in this process of seeking understanding. Because, as one theologian so wryly put it, the trinity is not two men and a bird.

There are two ideas I find helpful here for our work of translation, in our trying to understand Advent.

First, to say that god is three in one is to say that to the very core of god's self god is in relationship. That god is composed of relationship. So when I say "God" I do not mean a robed man in the clouds. To say that God is three in one is to say that God is composed of relationship.

Second, the incarnation, the birth of Jesus is the embodiment of God's desire to be in intimate relationship with the human by becoming human.

The theologian Kathryn Tanner says, quote, "In Jesus, unity with God takes a perfect form; here humanity has become God's own."

The Rev. Dr. Willie Jennings puts it this way, quote, "God in Jesus embraced our vulnerability in order to embrace us, revealing the truth to us, that we were created out of love for life with God, designed fundamentally, deeply for relationship. This is our design." End quote.

Inside this theological frame, Christmas is fundamentally a story about connection, about love transforming the world by entering it.

Now, if we layer the context and circumstances into the story, it becomes even more shocking.

In our modern depiction of it the Christmas scene has become rather cute.

But in fact, it is both historically and metaphorically inaccurate to depict Jesus as a freshly bathed white baby with golden curls sleeping in a pristine gazebo strung with lights. This portrayal of Jesus's birth is remarkable for the degree to which it has been sanitized. Mary is dressed in blue and white robes, glowing and serene, as if she's spent the day in a Swedish spa.

Now I have not given birth, but my sense is it's not a spa experience. Especially not if you're young and poor and find yourself giving birth in a barn. The scene is in truth scandalous, because it undermines the projection of empire onto God, it undermines the worship of power over, because God chooses to enter the world not as a king but as a baby dependent on his mother.

And remember, this was a time when being an unwed woman was so dangerous that if your husband died, his brother was obligated to marry you to protect you from violence and destitution. And when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant he almost left her. It took an angel interceding to stop him.

Can you imagine: you're a young, poor, unwed woman who is nine months pregnant with a child that isn't your partner's. And you are going by foot to the capital city in order to be counted for the census, because you live under an oppressive empire. And on this journey you realize you're going in to labor, but wherever you ask for shelter you get turned away. So you end up in a stable, giving birth alone with your partner in the night, with only the light of the moon and the stars to guide you.

Can you imagine?

Labor is a dangerous thing today, even with all that we know about medicine and maternal health. But Jesus was born before all that. There wasn't even a midwife, and they're in a barn. There are no pristine baby swaddles in this scene. It is messy and human and there is no epidural to ease Mary's pain, no team of nurses and doctors to ease Mary and Joseph's fear. They're alone in the night giving birth to a mysterious child that the King, King Herod, wants killed. It isn't safe.

Can you imagine? And yet, the Christian story says that this is how God chooses to enter the world. This is where we find the indwelling of the divine that wants to know us.

It is a radical thing to say that the God with us comes in the form of this child. It pushes against all ideas that our worth, our desirability is somehow a product of our success or independence or achievement. Because God enters the world from the margins, not as a king, but as an infant, vulnerable and dependent on his mother, seeking relationship. And remember, this baby becomes the man who says the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. To say that god is three in one is to say that god is composed of relationship, that god is made of connection and love.

Advent is a season of preparing for love to find us in the most unlikely of people and places. A season for expecting the indwelling of the sacred in the messy, for recognizing our own great desire for relationship and leaning in to it.

But this focus on the desire for connection can also be a source of grief in this season, as we talked about last time. The grief for all those gone from this world, gone from our lives, and the grief of unfulfilled hope.

It can be a season in which the difference between what we wish and what is weighs heavy on our hearts, because our image of love is this perfect happy family, and that isn't actually real. Love isn't perfect or tidy, and the vulnerability necessary for connection also makes us vulnerable to hurt and disappointment. In the desire for our lives to resemble a greeting card, it can become a season of feeling insufficient, not one of expectant hope.

And I think this is in part due to the quaint sterility of the way we talk about Christmas. The awe and the hope get lost when we make the story

tidy and palatable, when we erase the messy and sacred reality of this night.

The Christian story is about a God that does not turn away from suffering, a god that chooses to be born into it, in order to be with us in our human vulnerability.

Liberation theologians call this accompaniment, this god with us in the places and moments of anguish. Accompaniment is the idea that we are not alone on our journey, because the sacred dwells with us, helping us to survive. In the Christian story, this is possible because Jesus is born into suffering, because Jesus knows in his body what it means to be human.

This is what Advent is expecting.

It is a season for making space in our lives for relationship and connection, for remembering that the birth of something holy might happen in the most unexpected places, that we are loveable in our imperfection, that we are not alone in our humanness.

Advent is a season for expecting that the desire for connection is transcendent and transforming, that the stars will help us find the love we seek. In the biblical story the star marks the place where the child is born, so that those who seek him in faith can find him.

This story reminds us to look for that shining star of love, those sparks that beckon us towards life and ask us to imagine greater possibilities. It speaks of the unexpected moments of grace and love that crack us open.

Advent is a season that asks us to rest in the belief that the holy lives in the most unlikely places, that the pull of life and love drawing us back into relationship will be tender and messy and vulnerable, and therein lies its power.

Advent beckons us on the journey to seek that shining star, to embrace life, to grow in our capacity to love and be loved.

Amen.