"Can We Talk About Advent?"[1]
By Phillip Brandt

Abstract

Those who are awake to the meaning and celebration of liturgical seasons have long bemoaned the eclipse of Advent by secular Christmas. But this is not just an aesthetic problem of Christmas carols preemptively shouldering aside rich Advent hymnody and practices. Advent, as a season of penitence, does necessary and healthful things to the worshiper. Can we identify that a hunger for penitence manifests in culture and use its own grasping for meaning, penitence, and reflection to achieve Advent goals in other times and seasons? Rather than fighting against culture, can we let culture do some of the heavy lifting for us? I believe so.

Introduction

Late this fall, on the Sunday which falls closest to the feast of St. Andrew for those following the Roman Calendar or the day after the feast of St. Philip (Nov. 15) for those following Eastern rite, liturgically oriented Christians will enter the season of Advent. In the West, we will set up our wreaths, diligently light an increasing number of candles, and perhaps gather for a special midweek service. In the parish I attend this midweek service will be preceded by a simple meal of soup and bread which has roots in ancient Advent practices of fasting. But, incongruously, we almost always have dessert too. Traditions vary across the ethnic and liturgical spectra of Christendom. In the East the Orthodox tradition has rather strict rules of fasting in this season, which for them continues until Jan. 6. But even in more relaxed traditions, in some way, many Christians will at least observe it. If nothing else, the first Sunday of Advent will mark the beginning of another year in the liturgical cycle of readings.

I have no quarrel with this and indeed cherish much of what passes for Advent these days. I assert, however, that what passes for Advent in most of our parishes would be unrecognizable as a penitential season to the generations of Christians who observed the season prior to the modern period. Again, let me reiterate, I am not seeking to change what currently passes for Advent; I am in fact appreciative of what it is attempting to do. I do wonder, however, how it affects the folks within our congregations. Being a Lutheran, I need to ask that question. Law and Gospel are not actually determined by the content of the words and actions we speak and perform as much as they are by the effect which the words and actions have on the hearer. This has only sharpened for me over the past decade as I have left called parish ministry to enter the ranks of the academy. I am no longer the one immersed in sermon preparation and hymn selection every week. When I was, the liturgical calendar was a very real part of my life, profoundly shaping me. Now, I am the one experiencing that hard work on the part of the pastor and musicians of the parish I attend. In my work-a-day world, I am far more influenced by other calendars, primarily academic. December is not a period of fasting, penitential vows, and an

[1] This paper was presented at the Fall 2018 regional mini-conference of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians (ALCM) held at St. Andrews Lutheran Church in Portland, Oregon, on October 13.

emphasis on prayer but of final exams and the end of the term. Both have a certain apocalyptic tenor, but they are very different.

When I look at my own experience and speak to my fellow parishioners, I find that Advent is simply not a penitential season. It is a season of feasting, parties, decorating trees, and preparing for a grand party on the 25th of the month. The Advent which Gregory I (590-604) codified was an occasion for rigorous and healthy penitential practices of fasting, self-denial, penitential vows, and the earnest amendment of a sinful life. The culture in which we swim has shouldered this Advent aside. Christmas has started sometime shortly after Labor Day, if the merchants have their say. By the time the Thanksgiving holiday has rolled around, any pretense to fasting and self-denial is effectively crushed by a round of holiday parties, the excesses of consumerism, and the incessant pressure to make sure the house and table are Christmas-ready.

Even those who argue against this are really making an aesthetic argument more than they do a pastoral argument for penitential practices. Liturgical grumps crabbily insist that carols must wait and the crèche needs to be infant-less until the actual Feast of the Nativity. They argue that it is not Christmas yet, and we need to pay attention to that. At best their congregations may indulge them as eccentrics. Mostly they are politely ignored.

Those grumps are right. I have been one, holding the line on Christmas carols in worship until the actual Christmas season. I probably am still a little grumpy about this. I have been known to quiz cashiers in December about when the 12 days of Christmas fall on the calendar. They never get it right. I insist on saying Merry Christmas to them until Jan. 6. My children roll their eyes and my wife finds some magazine so engrossing in the next aisle that no one would casually connect us as married while I do this. I miss the Christmas that started on Christmas day but even as I make these arguments I realize that I am not actually arguing for a penitential season. I am arguing for an aesthetically defined season. As I consider the lives of my parishioners and the students whom I currently teach, I note the absence of the Advent which was intended by the fathers: a period of penitential practices. I grieve that loss too and fear for the people who live without it. They need it as well. This is why I want to talk about Advent. I am not trying to restore an aesthetic season which waited until Dec. 24 to erect the Christmas tree. I really do not care when the tree is set up. I am arguing that in the 21st century, people need a time to repent. Advent, even if we keep the Christmas carols at bay for the first 24 days of December, simply cannot be that season in our current cultural situation.

In this article I propose to take a brief look at Advent, its origins, and its purpose. But this is not simply an historical exercise. I intend to propose that we need to reconsider this season and how we embody the Advent proclamation of Law and Gospel in our cultural context. Advent is not an artifact which we need to preserve. It was founded as an ecclesial action which conveyed a particular message and worked a particular work for the congregant. I would distill Advent's original message/effect, particularly its penitential emphasis and practices, and ask whether Advent and Christmas as more recently formulated actually accomplish what we want or even need them to accomplish. And then I would propose a reconsideration of just how we might accomplish that essential Advent and Christmas task. My proposal is that we consider the two or

three weeks immediately after the Christmas holiday as an intentionally and liturgically observed penitential period.

A Pastoral History of Advent

Advent is a relatively late addition to our liturgical calendars but is still ancient. The Advent we know, a period of four Sundays prior to the feast of the Nativity, took shape in the pontificate of Gregory I in the late sixth century.[2] That, however, is only the modern shape of the season. Gregory did not create the season but was giving shape to existing practices which were observed before he came to office. There are several antecedents which indicate that precursors to Advent existed. We know that the early church was observing a winter Pascha of sorts. Earlier in the 5th century Leo I (the Great) chided Sicilian bishops for practices surrounding baptisms in this season. He thought that their celebrations were eclipsing the more important Spring Pascha when Baptisms were traditionally held.[3] Unfortunately, there is just not sufficient data, and it conflicts a great deal, to say too much about this proto-advent season. That of course has not inhibited liturgical and patristic scholars from making speculation.

As with Easter, the winter Pascha—the celebration of the Incarnation—was preceded by a period of penitential reflection, self-denial, catechetical preparation, and fasting. Our scanty references to this period of winter fasting suggest that it was initially understood and articulated as a period of preparation for Catechumens who were to be baptized. It might be assumed that this period of fasting was designed for a small part of the community, but there is evidence that this period of fasting may pre-date the practice of baptism at Epiphany and may have been generally practiced. This question of a pre-Epiphany fast is made much more complex by the uneven introduction of Dec. 25 as the Festival of the Nativity. Prior to the elevation of this Christmas date, the penitential period seems to have been leading to the celebration of Epiphany on Jan. 6. The introduction of another festival, Christmas, less than two weeks earlier, in the middle of the fast, and at which Baptisms also seem to have been conducted, have significantly muddied our understanding of these early observances of an Advent-like season. [4]

A second origin to the season may also be discerned. It appears to have been a season of Marian piety. In several communities, special emphasis was given to the annunciations in this period, culminating in the annunciations to Mary and Joseph. While the Annunciation narrative remains in the western rite on the Sunday prior to Christmas, this was more prevalent in the Eastern dioceses of the Church.[5]

A third observed rationale for the season falls under the title of "Fast of the Tenth Month" (December). This may have roots which predate Christianity itself as a received tradition from Roman culture in which inhabitants of Italy fasted in each season of the year, the winter fast

[2] Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 158.
[3] Nathan Mitchell, "The Winter Pascha," *Worship* 67, no. 6 (1993): 535.
[4] Bradshaw, *Origins*, 160–3.
[5] Ibid., 158–9.

falling in the tenth month.[6] This was rooted in the agricultural rhythms of the Italian peninsula. It has been argued that the early Christians in Rome "baptized" this period of fasting.[7]

This penitential season, adapted to circumstance and calendar, became Advent. It never had the same severity and austerity as the Lententide. Should one sing "Alleluias" in Advent? The answer is much less settled than it is in the case of the Lenten proscription of "Alleluias". It appears that this penitential period prior the Nativity/Incarnation/Epiphany was often conceived of as a parallel (imitation?) of Lent, but one without same intensity. It also did not have the same unanimous shape as Lent. In some places beginning as early as Nov. 11, even in some places extending to as early as the Conception of John the Baptist on Sept. 24.[8] In Milan, within the Ambrosian Rite, it is still a period of six weeks, not four.[9]

An Important Aside on Ancient Penitence and Fasting

This paper is interested in the practices which marked this period. What did observing Advent entail for the Christians of the late antique and early medieval periods? The modern congregant is often unaware of the extent to which both Lent and Advent reflected the culture which obtained at the point of their establishment. The early church walked a very rigorous and sometimes excessively penitential road which is alien to a modern western outlook. Advent was not as severe as Lent in many places because it only added one day of fasting to the weekly calendar. Christians were expected to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays every week of the year except the festivals. In Advent, they also were expected to fast on Mondays.[10]

This seems excessive to moderns. But these ancient practices were rooted in a particular way of looking at the world. In the ancient and medieval world, persecution and plague were frequently seen as visitations of divine justice and occasions for very visible acts of repentance.[11] A visitor to Rome today will likely visit the Castel Sant' Angelo. It was originally Hadrian's (died 138) tomb but by the Medieval period had been converted to a fortress. It derives its name from an event which is said to have happened in 590, in the days of Pope Gregory I. A plague was ravaging the area, and Gregory heard that a pagan shrine had recently been rejuvenated and was even attracting Christians. Assuming that the plague was punishment for this sin, Gregory destroyed the shrine and several others. Upon his return at the head of a penitential procession, he was said to see Michael the Archangel atop the tomb, cleaning and sheathing his bloodied sword. An angel has adorned the top of the Hadrian's mausoleum for many of the years since then.[12] We have no idea if this story is true—likely it is a medieval fable—but what matters is

[6] Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), 148.
[7] J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1993), 14–7.
[8] Ibid., 14.
[9] Bradshaw, *Origins*, 164.
[10] Alexander, *Waiting*, 13.
[11] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol I, 2d ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 429–30.
[12] https://hefenfelth.wordpress.com/2012/05/19/st-michael-the-plague-and-castel-sant-angelo/ (accessed 10/15/2018).

that it was perceived as factual in the medieval context. This "made sense" in the medieval world.

I bring this story up because it introduces us to the different world in which the early and medieval church lived and in which it formulated its penitential seasons. Gregory, of course, is the same Gregory who decreed the Advent season of four weeks prior to Dec. 25. These people took very seriously Jesus' opening words of his ministry: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." They fasted twice a week in non-penitential seasons. They went on pilgrimages. They took vows of self-denial and engaged in penitential actions. The Medieval Church developed an entire system of penitential actions against which Luther's efforts at reform were initially directed.[13]

For many of these early centuries of the Church, these penitential seasons of Advent and Lent served to give space to penitence but then also to contain and restrict the penitential impulse. The Christians often saw that they were subject to forces and events which were completely beyond their control but which God manipulated to bring about repentance. As late as the Reformation period, the great Black Death of the 14th century and later evoked massive penitential processions between cities.[14] People would abuse their bodies and fast excessively. Even a young friar name Martin Luther would fast so much that it seems to have affected his health later in life. Advent and Lent were the spaces in the year when people fasted rigorously, made special vows, and practiced all sorts of self-denial.

Lent and Advent may well have been introduced not so much to encourage these acts of repentance but to contain them. Egeria, the late 4th century pilgrim to the Holy Land, noted the prescribed cessation of fasting in the Eastertide, and she noted her and the people's eagerness for the resumption of their regular fasting.[15] They did not chaff under the fast but at the feast. The people were given seasons in which they were encouraged to repent so that room could be made for the rejoicing of Christmas and Easter. Had this not been done people would have simply continued to repent all the time, and the great festivals would have been somber affairs and not the bright and joyous festivals which they were intended to be. If it is a struggle to see this, consider the life of an early and medieval church hero. Simeon the Stylite was evicted from his monastic community because his penitential practices were too severe. That is how he eventually ended up on top of a pillar praying for 37 years, an act of radical self-denial.[16] The ancients did not need to be encouraged to these penitential actions. They needed to be encouraged to moderate them. Simeon resisted the effort to moderate. The 20th Canon of the council of Nicea mandates that there be no kneeling for prayer on Sundays and in the days of Pentecost (Easter).[17] It was a time to celebrate the resurrection and proclaim ownership of divinely granted status before God as the redeemed children of God. That meant the proper posture was standing at

[13] Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2015), 37.
[14] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2010), 553–4.
[15] Egeria, *Egeria's Travels,* trans. John Wilkinson (Oxford: Aris and Phillips Press, 2006), 159–61.
[16] MacCulloch, *Christianity,* 207–9. (Cf. plate #3, after p. 206)
[17]Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils,* ed. Henry R. Percival (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 43. It should also be said that the ancient practice of kneeling at prayer needs to be seen in a polemical light as well. Kneeling differentiated the Christian from the pagan.

prayer. They did not have to encourage kneeling; they had to encourage the non-penitential posture of standing. This is why the Sundays in Lent are "in" Lent. The people had been repenting so hard for the other six days that Sunday was supposed to be a relaxation of repentance.

A Comparison to the World of Today

Consider how different our situation is. A Lenten Sunday is likely the only time most of our people will ever even think about—let alone engage in—any penitential action. Even that might simply be limited to noting that an observant liturgical planner has omitted the hymn of praise and "Alleluias" from the service. Rather than our seasons of Advent and Lent giving voice to a powerful cultural impulse to repentant action, we are often in the role of having to teach repentance and encourage it. Our people have not been excessively repentant. On the contrary, they have been altogether too indulgent of passions, desires, and vices. They come to church—if they come at all—blithely unaware of the gravity of their sin and certainly not connecting their modern problems (aching back, tanking retirement account, or marital troubles, for example) to their need to repent and get right with God. They may come lonely, afraid, and hopeless, but they do not perceive that fasting, penitential vows, self-denial, and other tradition acts of penitence associated with Advent are the proper course of action. These troubling parts of their lives are perceived as the results of poor choices or circumstances—maybe genetics or financial forces—beyond our control. They come perhaps with an aggrieved sense of entitlement; certainly they come needy, happy for help, but not gripped by a penitential impulse which can be expressed liturgically and which the liturgy and worship of the Church needs to channel and constrain.

We are left, however, with seasons which are originally designed to meet that very different antique situation. I believe they can adapt. Lent, because Easter is not the gift-giving orgy that is secular Christmas, is not under the same pressure. The Christian has space to observe in Lent within our culture. Fasting, prayer, and gifts to the poor can find room, albeit cramped, in that season to be done meaningfully. No one is cramming "Alleluia" laden hymns or "I'm dreaming of a green Easter" into their ears through the speakers in Kohl's.

Advent, on the other hand, is a completely different story. We are all aware of this. December can hardly be a time when we think about fasting, self-denial, and other penitential practices. Black Friday and Cyber Monday have kicked off a spending frenzy which is whipped into a fever pitch by merchants. I have great sympathy for the merchants. My mother worked in a small gift store for some years which was owned by her good friend. For eleven months of the year they made no profit. The entire profit for the year was the Christmas season. If I were a merchant, I would undoubtedly be trying to maximize that as well.

While it is understandable, this commercial Christmas has had an effect on both the Advent and the subsequent Christmas seasons. By the time Christmas arrives on Dec. 25, most people are sick of it. The Christmas trees, having adorned the living rooms since the day after Thanksgiving, are tinder dry and will be left on the curb for the local Boy Scout troop to gather and recycle on Dec. 26. Simply for reasons of fire prevention this is a good thing. The decorations are quickly boxed up and only a stray loose end of wrapping paper drifting across the

play room floor might give any indication that Christmas has come and gone. December was for amassing the pile of toys and baubles which now lie in the corner. The liturgically minded know that the feast of Christmas has really just begun on December 25. Our neighbors and fellow congregants, however, have displaced Advent with another sort of Christmas and are no longer ready for the festival when it finally arrives. Penitential Advent, having been muscled aside by the loud and prematurely celebrated Christmas, is not part of their December at all. At most we can expect that Christmas day will serve as the culmination and crescendo of a pre-Christmas season.

Should we grieve that? Aesthetically the commercialized Christmas is gauche, and spiritually the whole gift-giving emphasis of secular Christmas has largely been hi-jacked by a self-serving ethos which is difficult to fit into the observance of the Incarnation of Christ. That is a loss, but an adroit preacher and the careful worship planner can steer clear of the aesthetic train wrecks and even reclaim the spiritual depth in many of the practices of Christmas as it is observed in the weeks prior to Christmas. In fact, as I preach in various congregations in my area, I find that we are already doing that. Emphases on loneliness, community, and the spiritual significance of gift-giving abound. They are importations of Christmas into the Advent time-slot. I think we need to do more of this. But in order to that, Advent will need to make room for a Christmas which begins much earlier. We will have to embrace the Christmas of December 1-24 and find another time for the Advent emphases on penitence.

A Pastoral Proposal for Reform

What, then, to do about Advent, and especially its practices penitence, fasting, and simplicity? Here is where I believe we need to recognize the power of culture and stop working against it. The culture is pushing Christmas before Dec. 25 and that is displacing the language of self-denial, reform, and simplicity. The richness and celebratory character of Christmas is overwhelming the penitential themes of old Advent. I do not believe we can stop this and we ought not to try to stop this. What is more I think we are already navigating this well. We have picked upon congruent themes already present in our Advent readings which allow us to import some of the incarnational joy of Christmas. Themes of hope, communal fellowship, and light, which would have been alien to an early church observer of Advent, have regularly found their way into the worship life of parishes on Sunday. We need to preach these themes of Incarnation, Christ, and his hope-giving presence in this world right now. If we wait until the 12 days of the festival (Dec. 25-Jan 6), we have missed the moment at which our people are really ready to hear that. The iron is no longer hot.

In fact, it may be wise to import Christmas hymnody and themes into the Sundays of December prior to the Festival. *Of the Father's Love Begotten; Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising; Once in David's Royal City; Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light;* and *Joy to the World* will largely be unsung if we leave them to the 12 days of Christmas. What is more, their themes and messages can fit beautifully into pastoral care for people who are rendered lost, lonely, and disoriented by the commercial Christmas observances which surround us.

But what of Advent's original works of penitence? My proposal does not mean jettisoning the Advent emphasis on penitence, but I do think we need to relocate it out of the Advent season. I say that because the culture continues to recognize the necessity of these penitential acts and has even provided us with an alternative season of penitence associated with Christmas. This season, however, begins in the days immediately after the Feast of Christmas, not before it.

Consider the actions of penitence. When we repent, we consider our life and its need for reform. We make a vow, a promise to do better, and take steps before God to amend our sinful life. What is this frank acknowledgement of my problem and a promise to better myself but another language for speaking of a New Year's Resolution? That resolution, spiritually understood, is a penitential vow. In addition to penitential vows, penitence often involved fasting and self-denial. In my house, because of billing cycles, the first days of the New Year bring me the grim news of my sins of excess as credit card bills begin to show up in my mailbox. Enforced fasting ensues as fiscal constraints limit our consumption—or one could call this self-denial. If you are like me, the most dreadful part of the post-Christmas penitential season is the day I screw up enough courage to mount the bathroom scale and take grim stock of the damage done by too much feasting, my lack of self-control, and insufficient exercise. Now the piper must be paid in gnawing hunger, sweat, and tears.

This is all the language of repentance, but it is couched differently from the liturgical language of repentance, and therefore I think we miss it. We need to seize this time of penitential action and make it into a season of penitence—effectively relocating the Advent penitential action to the days after Christmas. Another way to think of this is to say that these actions—which people are doing anyway—need to be taken before God and not simply in service to the self.

Of course such a course of action will necessitate rethinking what we are doing. I wonder, though, if it is not high time for that and if the re-thinking will be limited to the way we talk about New Year's resolutions. Our modern discussion of repentance is perhaps not rooted as much in Scripture as we imagine it to be. We tend to see penitence solely as some abasement before the divine, a mental activity, a re-orientation of my inner self and not my embodied life. New Year's resolutions seem to be too self-help or therapeutic for our theologically motivated ideas about repentance. But is that really so? Yes, dieting and fiscal restraint have a self-serving component to them both. But so did the massive penitential processions of the 14th century and Gregory's destruction of the shrines in Rome. They wanted the plague to stop. The Quartodeciman observance of Easter in the first centuries of the Church's life included specific times of fasting which coincided with the Jewish Passover feasting. While the Jewish competition feasted, Christians fasted in order to set ourselves apart.[18] This seems to have been fasting as a sort of inter-religious polemical statement. In their extreme mortification the desert fathers sought something for themselves in relationship with God. Simeon the Stylite sat on his platform at the top of a pole for over 30 years because he understood this as a way to be closer to God. But we should not ever forget that the ascetics of the first centuries of the Church were also

[18] Bradshaw, *Origins*, 42.

immensely popular. One did not become a superstar through Instagram in ancient world. One did something dramatic like sitting on a pole for decades. Simeon had to move to increasingly higher pillars because the crowds of pilgrims kept him from his austerities. He was consulted by emperors and bishops.[19] By the end of his life, a double wall had to be constructed around his pillar to keep the crowds out. Can we exclude this popularity as part of what kept him upon that pillar? The presence of a self-beneficial effect to our repenting is not the problem. The absence of any divine dimension to our New Year's resolution is the problem to which we will need to preach and plan.

We should not shy away from dieting as penitence and we should have a care for the physical health of our parishioners. This gives us an opportunity to speak to a gnostic protestant culture which disconnects the body from the spirit and subsequently from God. Can we observe this season with a "Biggest Loser" contest in the congregation? Can we understand that dieting and bodily care are churchly, holy things to do and not ancillary "social" activities which exist apart from worship? Can we suggest that God is cheering us on to better health? Could we offer a support group for people who are struggling to control their finances and get out from under credit card debt? Could that be seen as a spiritual thing and not simply a worldly concern? Should we make New Year resolutions into holy, liturgically recognized vows taken before God? Can the community of faithful Christians hold individuals accountable for those vows? Would we find them easier to keep that way? Obesity has been likened to a modern plague.[20] In the face of outbreaks of bubonic plague medieval flagellants walked between cities and beat themselves raw. Can we have a volksmarch and call it is a similarly penitential and holy thing?

For this we may need new hymnody, and this suggestion is made with some trepidation. The lyricist will need to delve deeply into the theology of the physical world and creation. Modern American Protestantism is only recently discovering that it is in many respects gnostic in its thought, imagining salvation as an escape from the physical to an ethereal heaven of harps, halos, wings, and clouds but nothing real. Most of us were nurtured in a theology based in an unbiblical physical and spiritual dichotomy. It would be too easy for this to be facile and superficial, or worse, merely therapeutic, turning the Church into some sort of spiritual weight watchers organization. This hymnody and song will need to take careful consideration of what it means that God came into the physical world to redeem the physical world because he loves this physical world which he has made. Salvation is not an escape from this world but the redemption of this very broken world, even the corner of it I call my home, my life, and my body. Can we gather up the angst of the man or woman who failed again in the dieting goals, succumbing to the pleasures of food? Is there music to articulate the fear of losing your house or being unable to provide for your children because you are so close to insolvency? Can we focus on the Psalmists vows and his promises to fulfill those vows in the presence of God's people? Can we sing songs

[19] Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, et al., *The History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1985), 155–6. Cf. MacCulloch, 235.
[20] Cal Shipley, *Obesity – the Modern Plague*. https://www.calshipleymd.com/obesity-modern-plague/. Downloaded 9/5/2018.

of encouragement and bring praise to God when vows are kept? Can we bring all this into our churches once more?

Here is why I believe the penitential season which follows the Festival of the Incarnation may be necessary. Christ has come into this world, taken up human flesh, to redeem this world and all its sinful humanity. Salvation is not an escape from world of senses and the material. Christian salvation is God restoring us to right relationship with him and his creation. We need to re-connect the vow to do better in this body and life with God.

Anticipating some Responses

I am not suggesting that we jettison the liturgical season of Advent. Keep singing the Advent Hymns and light the Advent wreath. What I suggest is that we remove from Advent the burden of needing to be a penitential season which lives in tension with Christmas. Christmas has already intruded; make peace with that. Our culture is not allowing the penitential practices of historic Advent to happen. Advent originally became a penitential season of preparation as an adaptation to culture in the first centuries of the Church's existence. Can it adapt culturally to this age? I think so. I think it needs to.

Likewise, I think it is worth singing the Christmas hymns after the day of Christmas, but this too might work into this proposal. I have been in Target and heard them playing "Greensleeves," and, shockingly, with a vocalist actually singing the words of "What Child is This." But they always stop after one verse. The Christmas preacher and music planner will want to go onto that subsequent verse with its nail and spear which pierce him through. Christmas is about the Incarnation, after all. That incarnational emphasis of Christmas has always had a dark or penitential side to it. The feasts of Stephen (Dec. 26), Holy Innocents (Dec. 28), and even St. John (Dec. 27) afford occasions for reflection on the incarnation which might be very penitential. The Incarnation would be the impetus for the penitential season which follows. Christ's presence in the daily life we live provides motivation and strength to this repentance.

I would also say that I am not displacing the following season of Epiphany, but I am somewhat reimagining its purpose, particularly in the first weeks, within the life of the parish. Epiphany's lectionary contains material which is congenial to this penitential emphasis. Jesus is found in the waters of John's baptism for repentance in that Sunday which follows the Epiphany. What is he, the sinless Son of God, doing there? John baptizes for repentance and even himself asks the question in Matthew's account. Jesus tells John and us that this fulfills all righteousness. He has taken the sins of the whole world to himself. He must repent of them because we have failed to repent of them adequately. That presence of Christ both spurs us to repent more fully and allows us to cast our own vows, fasting, and other penitential actions into a far more spiritually healthy light. We are not earning points with God; we are simply being found with our Lord. Jesus' early ministry—which occupies the subsequent Sundays after the Epiphany—finds Jesus frequently exhorting people to repent for the kingdom is here.

There are concerns which are raised by this proposal.

First of all, we need to note the modern conception of repentance and how that also differs from the repentance to which the Holy Spirit continues to call people. We will have to be aware that some will hear this word repent and have in mind something utterly different from the repentance for which Jesus calls. This would seemingly manifest in a therapeutic understanding of my repentance in which my problems are not sins before God but simply unhealthy practices, thoughts, or attitudes. They are not sins which render me unholy and in need to God's gracious forgiveness.

Second, we will need to pay attention to how this will alter the way we celebrate Christmas and Epiphany. There are cherished and important traditions for any worshipping community involved here. As I note above, incarnational themes found in Christmas and penitential themes found in Epiphany are already giving us opportunity to step into a penitential mode. But we will need to have a care to remember the cherished elements of those seasons. This penitence needs its place, but it cannot occupy the whole space.

Third, I would not like us to repent of Christmas. Too often New Year's Resolutions manifest a sort of puritanical forswearing of all fun after a season of too much fun. But festivals need to be times of excess and joy. Don't repent of that. Repent of the life which knows only indulgence and nothing else. That life is not satisfied with Christmas joy, but always wants more and more. Or it finds that Christmas joy commercially observed was empty or shallow.

Fourth, the Church has already attempted to deal with this liturgically. I just don't think it has worked very well. The liturgical reforms of Vatican II—especially the adoption of a three year lectionary—has created a quasi-penitential season at the end of the church year, the three weeks in November which precede the Last Sunday of the Church Year/Feast of Christ the King. The eschatological focus here is alive and well, but the Christmas anticipation, Thanksgiving celebration, and cultural biases against penitence undermine its ability to inculcate the sort of penitential action this paper envisions. Rather, I think this ought to be seen as another preparatory or undergirding element of the post-Christmas penitential season. The eschaton needs to be lurking in the background and sometimes the foreground of penitence. This will not go on forever. There is an end, an accounting of things.

Conclusion

Any such proposal as this needs finally to ask whether what it proposes is better than what exists at the moment. I come to yet another Thanksgiving/Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season as I compose these words. Here is what I am expecting to happen. The pressure to celebrate will increase over the coming weeks as expectations rise for the Thanksgiving Day feast. We will be consumed by where, when, and with whom we will observe this secularly originated holiday. We will finally decide on which family members will be present, the menu, and where exactly the feasting will take place. The questions of who will bring dessert, who will bring the cranberries, and who will supply the yams will be settled. The yams will need to be without marshmallows at my house; that is non-negotiable. This is a liturgical event with clearly defined rules and expectations. The with-marshmallow crowd will be excommunicated with all

the fervor of a 19th century inter-denominational dialogue between German and Swedish Lutherans.

After the Thanksgiving feasting is done and the families have returned to their respective domiciles, we will engage in the preparation for Christmas. My family eschews the Black Friday crush and madness. Critical questions are when shall we erect the tree and decorate it? When will we complete the holiday shopping for gifts to be distributed at Christmas? When will we brave the ladder and weather to string the lights on the gutters of my home, cursing my earlier sloth during beautiful fall days? Yes, Advent will make its appearance. We will attend a midweek service preceded by a meal of soup and bread. But it will not be a penitential affair, a simple meal which allows me to divert resources to the poor in almsgiving. A friendly competition has arisen in my parish of late. A score of crockpots will show up with soups of increasing complexity and subtler flavors as the Wednesdays of December progress. We have become soup snobs. There will be dessert too. While a soup supper may have origins in fasting, any such ideas have been blunted. It is about fellowship and community. I am not complaining, merely observing.

The preacher—a very good one in my parish—on Sundays and Wednesdays will direct our attention to the promised Messiah. He will likely point to themes of darkness and light. There is much darkness to note and great need for the Light of the World. The candles will be lit during a family oriented litany of prayer and readings. We will sing "O, Come, O, Come, Emmanuel" every week as another candle on the wreath is lit. Will he wait until Christmas to proclaim that Light? I would not. On the Sunday prior to the festival, all the pretense of waiting will be pushed aside as the Sunday School presents their Christmas program. In the Narthex the Angel Tree program will make us all feel good about the growing mountain of gifts for the children of prisoners in the local penitentiary. While the readings will direct our attention to the fact that we are anticipating Christ, there will be little or no manifestation of this in practices. I forgo nothing in this season to mark the absence of Christ in my life. I will attend the staff party on 19th and join my fellow congregants in decorating the Church for Christmas several weeks prior to the actual day. After the last lights are strung and the tree is finished, we will eat cookies. My Lutheran university will present their Christmas concert in the first week of December, and my son's band will play their concert the same weekend, creating an odd confluence of beautiful and somewhat out-of-tune carols in my hearing.

The Christmas season will culminate in the night of our Lord's birth with one of the best attended services of the year. In fact, we will repeat it later that night so we can fit them all in. The next morning a much smaller gathering of folk will observe the feast in a morning service. The following Sunday will see the smallest attendance of the year as many take advantage of school and office closures to visit distant relatives. So dramatic is the attendance downturn, our usual two service Sunday morning schedule will reduce to one. Everyone is apparently "churched out" after extra Advent and Christmas Eve/Day services. The festivities have played out for them.

As I note above, I really do not have a problem with any of this. In fact, I would say that the wise preacher will note the attendance patterns and the relative importance of Incarnational

preaching for people and begin importing Christmas themes into those weeks prior to Christmas. His people have ears to hear that message. Preach when they are there, not when the church is empty.

But there will be little or no penitence in this time. We could scowl at the folks eating their Christmas treats or forbid the desserts at Advent soup suppers. We could turn the Angel Tree donation into an act of self-denial, giving gifts to others at the expense or in place of gifts to the people we love. I seriously doubt if this will have much traction in the lives of the folks we serve. They will buy the gift for the prisoner's child and two more for their own son or grand-son because it feels so good.

We simply ask where the real themes of the original Advent shall go. They have no home in the weeks prior to the Feast day itself. Dialed into celebration by Thanksgiving and surrounded by the festivities of cultural and religious Christmas, the fasting penitent will not find a supportive community, either outside or inside the Church. But how this changes in the days which follow the Feast of our Lord's Incarnation. The people who come that next Sunday are the stalwarts. They are ready for such a message. The week leading up to the change of the calendar is filled with retrospective, and often sorrowful retrospective considerations of the past year, famous people who have died, tragedies revisited, and measurements of progress or regress. It is a season for vows to do better. It is a time to consider life's excesses and their bitter effects upon our lives. People are ready to amend their lives.

The Church would be remiss if it did not acknowledge this opportunity. We have too long pretended that Christ's call to "repent and believe that the Kingdom is here" can be truncated simply to "believe." Oddly, our otherwise very secular world understands the need to repent as did the ancients. They are already doing it. They are not, however, engaged in the rich Christian tradition of repentance. They are trying to lose 20 pounds so they will fit in that dress or suit that hangs in their closet. We will not grab that fasting/dieting and make it into a spiritual thing but we will insist on a 12 day celebration for weary celebrants who are exhausted by the pre-party. We are out of step with the world. It is time to make like the ancients who gathered up a strong cultural impetus to repent and channeled it into the Church and brought the repentance before God. We really need to talk about Advent.

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