

Dallas Baptist University
Advent Vespers Service
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Longing, Expecting, Preparing
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Advent is the first season in the Christian year or church calendar. It focuses on *longing*, on *expectation*, and on *preparation* for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who graciously redeems God's very good but radically fallen creation.

This longing, this yearning for Christ's coming to defeat evil in all its forms and consequences and to make all things new has its origin in the experience of Israel in Egypt. There the Israelites ached for God to break into their situation of slavery in Egypt and deliver them from injustice, oppression and misery. As Exodus 2: 23 says, "And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage and they cried out; and their cry for help, because of their bondage, rose up to God."

Many centuries later, the tribe of Judah found itself in exile in Babylon, one of the fiercest nations ever to exist on the face of the earth. They, too, hoped and prayed for God's messiah or Anointed One to intervene in their desperate situation, bring judgment on their wicked captors, and return them to their city and home land which God would restore in ways beyond imagining. As Isaiah 52: 7 states, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'

But this longing for God's coming in salvation power did not cease with Israel's deliverance from Egypt or Judah's restoration Jerusalem. Pious Jews living in Palestine in the first century under the harsh tyranny of the Roman Empire also longed for God to act in a mighty way to destroy their oppressors and usher in the new age of blessing and joy.

The righteous Simeon was among this group who was looking for the consolation of Israel, as was the devout Anna who anxiously awaited Jerusalem's redemption. But unlike many who failed to recognize the Lord's Christ, both Simeon and Anna saw Him, and heard Him, and held Him — Jesus the Messiah — even as an infant.

As Simeon sang in Luke 2: 29-32, "Now Lord, You do let Your bondservant depart in peace, according to Your word. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." Of Anna it is written, "At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Jesus to all those who were looking for the consolation of Israel."

Mysteriously, however, this Jesus did not turn out to be the kind of Messiah everyone was expecting. He did nothing about the Romans, for they were not the real enemy. But what He did do was far more important in dealing with the real enemies of creation and humankind: He judged the evil one, He atoned for sin, He conquered death. For the true tyrant was Satan; the

true barrier was transgression; and the true enemy was death. Christ's kingdom victory has reconciled the world to God, established a new creation, and brought faith and hope, righteousness and peace, love and joy into the hearts and lives of those who believe. In this, the longing for redemption, anticipated in Egypt and in Babylon long ago, is fulfilled in Christ our Lord.

Longing, then, is the mood of this season of Advent. At this time of year, we put ourselves in the situations of those long ago who stood on tiptoe, looking ahead for the Savior to come. For this reason, we empathetically sing this great Advent hymn: "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

But this season of Advent is not merely a matter of trying to imagine what it was like to long for the first coming of Jesus, and celebrating a past event. Rather, Advent should also cause us to long for His coming *now* into our world and into our lives, and also in the *future* when He returns again and sets the world to rights (as Tom Wright likes to say). For Christ *has come*, but Christ also *comes*, and Christ is *coming again*.

How we should long for, pray for, and work for the in-breaking of God's redemptive kingdom in Christ into our world and culture today — To bring peace to war torn Iraq and justice to Sudan; to bring reconciliation to Palestinians and Jews battling over rights to land; to quell the threat of nuclear build up in Iran and North Korea; to bring civility to American politics in a nation deeply divided over cultural values; to deliver people trapped in a lifestyles of materialism and consumption; to end the holocaust of abortion and thwart the promotion of euthanasia; to protect the dignity of human life from destructive biotechnologies; to strengthen the bonds of heterosexual marriage and the sanctity of the home; to curb the increasing sexualization of our culture and the objectification of men and women; to renew truth, goodness and beauty in artistic expression and the media; to restore sanity to professional sports; to revive integrity and diminish corruption in business; to overcome racism and bring justice to the marginalized; to purge ecclesiastical scandal and superficiality and bring substance and vitality to the churches. And so on. As we can see from this litany of deep concerns, how great is the need for the Advent God's rule of righteousness and peace in our world today!

Do you long for Christ's advent in these public domains? Do you yearn to see Christ's kingdom make a difference in our culture and in the world? Cultivating this kind of longing, this kind of yearning to see the world repaired in Jesus Christ is what Advent is all about.

But it is also about the satisfaction of the longings of the human heart. How many people there are who live lives of quiet desperation, who are desperately longing for and need Jesus Christ in their lives right now (even if they don't realize it):

Desperate housewives and desperate husbands.

Desperate mothers and desperate fathers.

Desperate sons and desperate daughters.

Desperate widows and widowers.

Desperate singles, desperate girlfriends and desperate boyfriends.

Desperate students and desperate professors.

Desperate employers and desperate employees.

Desperate friends and desperate roommates.

Two contemporary songs put these feelings of desperation on display, our yearnings to find fulfillment, these longings of our hearts that can only find satisfaction in Advent. The chorus to Avril Lavigne's song "Anything But Ordinary" expresses these powerful human aspirations poignantly:

Is it enough to love?
Is it enough to breathe?
Somebody rip my heart out
And leave me here to bleed
Is it enough to die?
Somebody save my life
I'd rather be anything but ordinary please.

Similarly, these words from Switchfoot's tune "Meant to Live" also demonstrate how the empty heart will not and cannot be satisfied by anything on its own in this fallen world, but is searching for something more to give it genuine life.

We want more than this world's got to offer
We want more than the wars of our fathers
And everything inside screams for second life.

So you see, just as the Israelites in Egypt, Judah in Babylon, and the Jews in Jesus' day longed for the coming of God into their worlds to save them, to give them second life, so we long for the same today in our individual lives. This, too, is what Advent is all about, as we sing these lines from this great Advent hymn:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee.
Come to earth to taste our sadness, He whose glories knew no end;
By His life He brings us gladness, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.

Advent longing must then transition into Advent expectation, for just as God acted in the past, so He will act faithfully in response to our needs as well. The hopes of the people of God in the past have been fulfilled and they will be fulfilled again. We must expect that God will come, holding us accountable for our sins to be sure, for He is like a refiner's fire (Mal. 3: 2), but then bringing redemption and showing us great grace.

Just as God delivered the Israelites from Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land, and just as He restored Judah from Babylonian captivity and rebuilt Jerusalem, and just as He sent the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, so in this Advent season we should expect Him to do great and mighty deeds in our world, in our lives, and in the lives of those we

love. Do you think this is impossible? God is a God of the impossible! Do you think He has forgotten? God is a God who remembers His covenant and keeps His promises!

Indeed, one of the three purple candles on the Advent Wreath is the candle of hope and expectation. The flame on top of the candle reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8: 12), that He illuminates our deep darkness both spiritually and intellectually, and that as the beneficiaries of His light, He calls us in turn to be light in the world (Matt. 5: 14-16). God has acted, is acting, and will act again. This is what we should expect Him to do.

But we must be prepared when He does. Only a few were ready when Jesus came the first time, folks like Simeon and Anna as we have seen, and people like Elizabeth, Zacharias, John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus. But most were not ready. Most of us could probably use a little spiritual fine-tuning, even now.

So as the first season of the Christian year, Advent provides us with the opportunity to get ourselves back into shape spiritually. Advent is the time to be renewed spiritually, so that we will be ready to remember and celebrate Jesus' incarnation and birth at Christmas time, and be receptive to His work in our world and lives now, and when He comes again. Yet many of us miss the true significance of this sacred season because we are not prepared because we are too busy or distracted or we just don't understand.

So what should we do? I would recommend four things briefly. **First**, Advent is the right time to *repent*, perhaps of some specific sin or sins, and especially of our spiritual sloth, laziness, and indifference. When we repent, we not only change our minds, as the Greek word (*metanoia*) literally means. More importantly, we are to change our lives. This is where Advent spirituality must admittedly begin, with a radical change in our walk with God, in our way of life, and in our relationships with other people.

Second, Advent is also a time for *prayer* — praying as you always would, but also asking God to reveal to you the deeper meanings and implications of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Give thanks to God for Christ's coming and for His coming again, and explore in prayer how these horizons frame your understanding of life and shape your callings and purposes as a child of God living in this world.

Third, Advent is a time for *meditation*. We need to set some time aside to be alone and to think. Reflecting on God and Scripture, reading a spiritually stimulating book (perhaps especially a good book of poetry), studying aspects of creation and culture are pursuits that will enrich the meaning of this time of the year. Advent ought to nourish us intellectually and spiritually.

Finally, Advent is also good for making fresh commitments to God that are heartfelt and achievable. If we make New Year's resolutions at the beginning of each new calendar year, we should also make genuine spiritual commitments at the beginning of this new Christian year. God

will reveal to you in what areas of life you need a fresh start. Ask Him, and He will open doors in your minds, your hearts to do His will.

Advent, then, is a time of longing, expectation, and preparation. May God place within us a great desire for the coming of Christ then, now, and in the future, let us expect Him to act, and may we be ready when He comes. Amen.