

Advent Service Homily
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Dallas Baptist University
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Time, History, and Advent:
A Meditation on the Meaning of the Advent Season

The Christian faith teaches that time and history are very important.¹ The Church has taught throughout the centuries that time is God's creation and gift. She also believes that history, as the unfolding of time, is the realm in which God has made Himself known through many mighty words and deeds. Consequently, without time and history, we would really have little or no knowledge of God in terms of who He is, what He is like, what He has done, or how we are to relate to Him.

Unlike some Eastern religions that deny the significance of time, or some misinformed Christians who tend to denigrate temporality in favor of eternity, both the Old Testament and the New Testament show just how important time and history are for the Christian faith. In the OT, for example, notice how time figures in so significantly and so specifically in the story about the beginning flood and the deliverance of Israel at the Exodus from Egypt:

Gen. 7:11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened (NASB).

Ex. 12:40 Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. Ex. 12:41 And it came about at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, that all the hosts of the \Lord\ went out from the land of Egypt.

Also recognize how the NT accents the importance of time regarding the coming of the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. For example, in Galatians 4:4, Paul writes: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law." Texts from the gospel of Luke show that the

¹ Hoyt Hickman, et. al. *Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 16.

coming of John the Baptist took place specifically in “the days of Herod, king of Judea” (Luke 1:5), and that the birth of Jesus occurred during “the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2: 2).

From these verses we see that the great events in both the OT and NT are rooted firmly in precise times and the regular flow of history. Indeed, God reveals Himself, judges sin, and redeems His people all in the ongoing events of ordinary life. We must realize, then, just how important time and history are in the Christian faith.

The way we *use our time* in daily life is one of the best indications of what is important to us. We always seem to be able to find the time we need to do those things we really care about and consider most important. Where there is a will, there is a way! Our use of time reveals who we really are and what we really love.

The way we *understand time itself* is also an important matter as well. Unfortunately, most of us, even though we are Christians, don't necessarily have a Christian view of time. Most of us tend to understand, mark and measure time by the *civil* calendar, the *academic* calendar, the “*Hallmark*” calendar, and the *personal* calendar. *The civil calendar* is one that is set up by the Federal Government, and calls upon us to recognize and celebrate certain holidays such as the following: Martin Luther King day, Presidents' day, Mother's day, Memorial day, Father's day, Flag day, Independence day, Labor day, Veterans day and Thanksgiving day.

The academic calendar, of course, is determined by educational institutions and regulates life according to the rhythms and demands of academic life: Fall semester, mid-term exams, fall break, dead week, final exams, winter commencement, Christmas break, spring semester, mid-term exams, spring break, easter break, dead week, final exams, spring commencement, summer break.

The Hallmark calendar, so-called, is a calendar created by greeting card companies primarily for economic purposes capitalizing on particular events in the civil and academic calendars which requires the purchase of cards, flowers,

and gifts for sentimental purposes. Consider the following examples: Valentine's day, Mother's day, Father's day, Grandparents day, Secretary's day, Boss's day, Kid's day and even Pet's day!

The Personal Calendar is a time management system that marks or identifies important personal deadlines, appointments, and various responsibilities, and also celebrates the events of one's individual life including such things as birthdays, anniversaries, and other memorable occasions.

Now there is nothing wrong with marking time by these four calendars, but there is a set of questions that need to be asked about how we look at time, if at all, Christianly: Is there another way to understand time besides these four common ways? Is there such a thing as a *Christian calendar* in addition to the civil, academic, hallmark and personal calendars? Is there a biblical way to understand, mark, and measure time and history? The answer to this question is a resounding YES!

The Jews, of course, had a unique way of marking time all year long through a series of offerings, feasts, and sacrifices. Jesus fulfills the OT, fulfills the special feasts and celebrations and days of the Jews, and thus He fulfills time itself, as He fulfills all things.

So the early Church by the end of the 3rd century had devised a calendar that is parallel to the Jewish calendar in many ways in which we celebrate how these OT events were fulfilled in the life of our Lord. That early Christian calendar included the following events:

- OT prophetic anticipation and expectation of the coming of Christ — Advent
- His incarnation and birth — Christmas
- His baptism and ministry — Epiphany
- His death and resurrection — Lent and Easter
- His ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit — Pentecost
- Ordinary life in the Holy Spirit — Common Time

This is called the Christian year or the Christian calendar and its purpose is to tell the story about Jesus year after year as the Church gathers to worship. Advent is the first season of the Christian year or Christian calendar. It is a

monthly long season of four weeks devoted to preparing for the coming of Christ at Christmas.

Now I don't know about you, but I find the Christmas holidays a bit stressful and almost always distracting in a spiritual way. That we have lost the reason for the season is a true truism. As a matter of fact, I have gotten to a point on my own thinking such that I celebrate two events during the Christmas season. The first is a *winter gift giving festival* that takes up about 90% of my time and attention, effort and energy. The second is the *incarnation and birth of Christ* which seems almost incidental to the holiday season and its fevers. As Madeleine L'Engle points out, Advent as "a season of awe and hope has nearly been lost in the hustle and bustle of crowded shops, office parties, and the terrible anxiety that comes from not knowing [just what it is we are celebrating or] that for which we are waiting."

But Advent and Advent services help us to refocus. It helps us to turn from the hustle and bustle of the hectic season and to reflect on the meaning of the experience which can often escape us. The meaning of the experience of Advent is this: "Waiting in joyful hope." This joyful, dependent waiting on God to act is expressed in three important ways during Advent season:

1. We join the people of the past in the OT as they waited for the coming of Israel's Messiah and the kingdom of God.
2. We also wait in the present as we seek to identify how God is present and working in our lives right now.
3. We also wait for Jesus' second coming in glory at the end of time when He will complete his redemptive work on the earth and restore all things.²

There is a past, present, and future aspect of Advent, as we reflect upon what God has done, is doing, and what He will do in the future in the world and in our lives. Thus, as we recognize just how important time and history are in the Christian faith, and that how we use and understand time is an important part of our Christian lives, and as we learn more and more about how the Church has

told the story of Jesus year by year through the Christian year/calendar, let us approach this upcoming holiday season differently, celebrating Advent as a time for silence, prayer, reflection, introspection, and as a way of anticipating the coming of Christ not only in history, but also in the present, and in the future, responding in obedience and faith to this admonition in the carol *Joy to the World* which states: “let every heart prepare Him room.”

Amen and amen.

² Mark G. Boyer, *Daily Reflections for Advent and Christmas: Waiting in Joyful Hope 2003-04* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003).