

Advent Meditation
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“Competing Cultures of Advent”

I have become convinced that we live in a culture of advent. What I mean is this. We live in a society that in its own unique way or ways is always hoping, always expecting, always anticipating that someone or something is coming. Whatever it is will soon arrive and deliver us from our unpleasant, if not miserable circumstances in life. It will provide us with the happiness, peace, and fulfillment we have all desired so desperately and for so long. Our culture is an advent culture — a culture of hope, expectation, and anticipation that someone or something is coming that will save us.

Thanks to the power and pervasiveness of the media, never before in history have we been more exposed to and informed about the tragic character of human life and the multiple tragedies that befall us in both natural and moral ways. How regularly and vividly we are exposed to the devastations wrought in the earth and in human lives by tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wars, genocides, terrorism, savagery, rape, abortion, murder, divorce, greed, lies, hatred, ambition, violence, robbery, sacrilege, lust, promiscuity, indecency, unchastity, fornication, adultery, incest, pornography, homosexuality, and so on.

With such astounding awareness of the natural and moral evil surrounding us, you would think that we would give up hope and collapse into cynicism and despair. In fact some do. For some, the eighth beatitude is said to be: “Blessed are those who refuse to hope, for they will not be disappointed.”

Yet “hope springs eternal in the human breast,” as Alexander Pope said in Epistle One of his *Essay on Man*. Because of our inborn tendency to think that where there’s life, there is hope, we earnestly believe that something good is bound to turn up. As a result, there is a natural spirit of advent in human nature and in human culture. In short, we human beings are advent beings and human

culture is an advent culture, always in search of a gospel, of some good news that will bring about a renewal and restoration of life.

To be sure, the kind of advent expectation that characterizes non-Christian culture is considerably different in character than the advent expectations of the Church. In contrast to the biblical story with its promise and fulfillment of a coming Savior who will redeem humanity and all creation from the tragic consequences of sin, death, and Satan, our secularized culture, *which is no less religious in character*, offers its own humanistic narrative of a redemptive history that focuses on other kinds of saviors and other kinds of salvation. In particular it focuses on the savior of *science* which is deemed to be omniscient or all knowing, and the savior *technology* which is said to be omnipotent or all-powerful, and the savior of the *economy* which is said to omnibenevolent or all good.

When these three facets of the secular trinity — science with its knowledge, technology with its power and the economy with its money — are combined into one, they will construct a humanistic utopia that will overcome evil and injustice, and make all things new!

The hopes and expectations our advent culture places in the coming of science, technology and money and their various offspring to our rescue are summed up well in the words of one of my favorite quotes from Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton's *The Transforming Vision* (pp. 139-140),

Just as God the Father sent the Son to effect our salvation, and the Holy Spirit now dwells with us to apply that salvation to our lives in the here and now, so it is in the redemptive history of secularism [our non-Christian culture]. The absolutization of science in the Renaissance fathered a tremendous technology which brings salvation, and the blessing and presence of these humanistic deities are today mediated to us through the economic consumer society in which we live, move, and have our being. The high god of scientism, in its omniscience conceived a divine plan and sent the son of technical mastery to subdue nature for our benefit. Divine reason took on flesh in the scientific-technological conquest of the natural world.

When the disciples of the new religion gathered at the industrial revolution, the spirit of capitalism was outpoured. And now in these last

days, we are filled with this spirit and are empowered to do mighty acts of production and consumption, looking for and hastening the day when the invisible hand will cause the economic age to come to trickle down to all nations. And in that day, everyone great and small, will have prosperity. From the beginning of time never has such a day been; wealth will cover the earth, and weeping and toil shall be no more.

This is our secularized advent hope, and in truth, it is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 revisited. In that original endeavor, the architects of Babel said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves.” Of course, we know that the outcome of this early enterprise was God’s unmitigated judgment. “Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11: 9).

Apparently, we have not learned our lessons from history, for in the past 500 years or so, we have reconstructed a similar “Babelesque” culture in which we have replaced our need for and hope in God with a humanistic faith in ourselves and in what our science, technology and economy can accomplish. Though it has recently undergone a stringent postmodern critique, our modern culture with its advent expectations has survived this critique, and is alive and well. Today, our monolithic culture nurtures and guides the hopes and dreams of most people here in the United States, and around the world. Without a doubt, this includes the hopes and dreams of many, many Christians as well.

Though we think we are, we believers are *not immune* to the overwhelming influence of our culture and its own version of advent. Even though we are church-goers and believe in the Bible, if we are honest with ourselves for just a moment, we will recognize that we base our hope for our futures on what our scientific, technological, and economic gods have to offer us, especially in terms of knowledge, power, and prosperity.

So what I am saying is this, ***that there are two competing competing advent cultures with two competing versions regarding our hopes and***

expectations for the future — the world’s and the church’s — and I can’t help but wonder which one has really taken hold of our imaginations and has more real practical power in our daily lives.

Is it Christ and his kingdom that is really at hand for you and for me? Or is it the sensualism, the materialism, and the egotism of contemporary culture that has gotten the upper hand in our lives?

On skeptical days, I am pretty sure that it is the latter, namely our culture’s gods, not the former, that is, Christ and his kingdom, that controls us. If so, even without knowing it, we have been *stained by the world*, which is contrary to true religion according to the Apostle James (1: 27). If so, we have failed *to guard ourselves from the nemesis of idols*, about which the Apostle John warns us in the last verse of his first epistle (5: 21). If so, *hypocrisy* has been crouching at the door, and it may have already mastered us.

In hopes, then, of removing the stain of worldliness from our hearts so that we may return to true religion, and in an attempt to repent of our idolatry so that we may worship the one true God once again, we need to recognize this cultural competition over advent expectations. We need to examine ourselves carefully to see where we stand. We need to rethink our lives, to repent if need be, and to bring forth attitudes and actions in keeping with our repentance. That is, we must reorient our lives around Christ and his kingdom. There is no better time than the season of Advent to examine the true advent expectations of our hearts and minds and lives.

To do this, we must remind ourselves of the world’s true story, indeed, of our true story, found in the Word of God, and what it teaches us the character of our hopes and expectations as the people of God. The English poet William Cowper helps to launch us on this review of the biblical story with these wonderful lines in his poem *Tirocinium*,

“Lispings our syllables, we scramble next
Through moral narrative, or sacred text;
And learn with wonder how this world began,
Who made, who marr’d, and who has ransom’d man.”

For, indeed, as the moral narrative and sacred text of Scripture reveals, in the beginning, God made a wonderful world of *shalom* for us as human beings, created to be His very image and likeness. Yet, we chose the pathway of revolt and declared our independence from God. We marred all things and ourselves by our sin. This was a great tragedy and an enormous catastrophe. As John Milton writes in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*,

Of man's disobedience and the fruit
of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
brought death into the world, and all our woe.

Because of this dreadful fall and its devastating consequences, we can readily understand why the human race has been in an advent mode ever since hoping, longing, expecting, anticipating that we would find a way out of our all our trials and tribulations and return to a better life. However, from the time of the fall up until now, we have only built Babels, and sought a humanistic kind of salvation rooted in own resources and for our own glory apart from God.

Despite this, what is most interesting is that from the time of the fall, God, too, in His great mercy and grace, has been in an advent mode as well. After creation, and the fall, He, too, has longed to bring true redemption to all creation. So He made great promises to this end, and has worked to fulfill them in history, culminating in the person and work of his own Son, our true Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Listen, then, to God's advent promises in the Old Testament:

The promise of a Savior through woman:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The promise of a Savior through Abraham and nation Israel:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; ... And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12: 1-3).

The promise of a Savior through the tribe of Judah:

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen. 49:10).

The promise of a Savior through the family of David:

"When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ... And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7: 12-16).

The promise of a Savior according to the Psalms

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." The Lord will stretch forth Thy strong scepter from Zion, saying, "Rule in the midst of Thine enemies" (Psalm 110: 1-2).

The promise of a Savior according to Isaiah the Prophet

"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness" (Isaiah 9: 6-7).

On the basis of these promises, we can say with Milton, "Far off his coming shone!" (*Paradise Lost*, 6. 768; cf. 1 Peter 1: 10ff). If there are other promises — and there are many — they could be summed up in the words of the beloved advent carol we are singing tonight in our service:

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. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Of course, in the fullness of time, God fulfilled His great advent promises and sent the long expected Jesus. Christ was born of woman, and that woman's name was Mary. She was the recipient of the annunciation, the one whom all

generations now rightly call blessed. Christ was, as promised, the offspring of Abraham and the true Israel, the one to whom all the promises were made, the one in whom they are all fulfilled. Christ was also of the lion of the tribe of Judah, and the son of David, the one who holds the scepter in his hand, and whose kingdom has no end. In his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus fulfilled the great expectations of the Servant of Yahweh, proclaiming:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are downtrodden, To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4: 18-19).

This is exactly what he did, and he did it through his entire life, in his faithful ministry, and by his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God. His sacrifice procured the salvation of the whole world. Though his mane was shorn, and he was subjected to death at the hands of the white witch, still he rose again from the dead and conquered it, and all his enemies.

Now he sits on his Davidic throne triumphant, and with the eye of faith, we see him as the almighty Ruler of the total cosmos. One day, He will come again a second time, roaring as a lion, and all his enemies will be made as a footstool for his feet. When he does come again, He will complete his great work of redemption, and transform the world he made in the beginning, *which was subjected to a seemingly endless winter because of our sin*, into an everlasting Christmas where all things are made new and in which perfect peace and love and joy dwell forever.

Undoubtedly, then, we live in an advent culture. Our culture gets it right in its longing and hoping and yearning for some kind of salvation. Our culture can't help but recognize how desperately we need help and a solution to our many, many problems.

But our culture gets it wrong in *what* it longs for, in *how* it hopes, and in *what* it expects to happen in the future. Our culture gets it wrong in placing its total trust and faith in science, technology, and money, or in so many other

things, that it believes will make life perfectly happy, and healthy, and whole. The false hopes that many men and women set their hearts upon so often turn to ashes. As the psalmist says, "A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength" (Psalm 33: 17). It is for this reason that the hope of the godless and the expectation of the wicked will ultimately perish (Job 8: 13; Prov. 10: 28).

But there is a true counter-culture of advent rooted in God, revealed in Scripture, and observed by the Church. It is found in hoping, and yearning, and longing for Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. He is the redeeming Lion who makes life truly happy, truly healthy, and truly whole. He is the one who puts everything else in its proper, unexaggerated place, including all our science, our technology, and our money, which we don't reject, but see as relative goods and the gifts of God, but certainly not as the absolute goods or the saviors of our lives.

So, there are competing cultures of advent, the world's and the church's. Which, might I ask, is really yours? Christ was promised. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ is coming again. This, I would submit to you, is the true advent. There is no better time than this season of Advent to examine the advent expectations of our hearts. Amen.