

The Advent Invitation

BY LARRY PARSLEY

Advent presents the Church with an engraved invitation. A countdown clock has begun for Christ's return engagement, and the fact that only God can read the numbers on the clock does not eliminate our need to respond enthusiastically to the invitation.

When you reach into the mailbox, you notice right away that one of the envelopes is not like the others. The cream-colored paper is made of a heavier bond, and your name is rendered in a fancy script. As you unseal the flap on the envelope, you realize that what you hold in your hands is no piece of junk mail.

You have received an invitation. Your hostess has chosen you from among many other potential invitees, and with the honor of the invitation goes the responsibility of an honorable response. You mark the date on your calendar, make preparations to dress appropriately, and bring gifts certain to please your hostess. All of this must be done in a timely fashion. Once the invitation is received, a countdown clock begins.

Advent presents the Church with an engraved invitation. The discerning believer recognizes a difference between this invitation and the other urgent parcels which flood our lives in December. The Christ who once visited Bethlehem has promised a return engagement, this time with much greater fanfare. A countdown clock has begun and the fact that only God can read the numbers on the clock does not eliminate the Christian's need to respond enthusiastically to the invitation.

TICK, TICK, TICK...

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome I can almost hear the ticking of an alarm clock in the background.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:11-14

Paul reminds his hearers that they “know what time it is” (13:11). What time is it? It is time for a fundamental change of posture and outlook. Off with the pajamas and sleeping through life! It is time to get up and out of bed, to don garments appropriate for the daytime. It may still be dark outside—sometimes 5:35 a.m. is just as dark as midnight. But the believer’s faith is like an internal body clock, intuiting that “the night is far gone, the day is near” (13:12).

It is past time to lay aside the “works of darkness” (13:12) because the manifestation of our glorious salvation is imminent. Our labor in the kingdom of God will soon culminate with an invitation to the King’s table. Our attitude, especially during the Advent season, is to pay close attention to the “tick tock” of time.

When Paul describes the “night life,” his examples are stark and severe. No doubt some of his Gentile hearers recalled with sadness nights they spent in a drunken stupor or inappropriate sexual liaisons. Other listeners perhaps remembered seasons of a marriage, or seasons of a life, dominated by “quarreling and jealousy” (13:13). But now the Spirit of God in each and every heart, like an alarm clock, is urging believers to move beyond what the Country and Western singer Freddy Fender once referred to as “wasted days and wasted nights.” Now is the time, Paul intimates, to leap from bed with the adrenaline rush of one who knows she has overslept, and tend to the important daytime business that awaits us.

Now is the time to robe ourselves with what Paul refers to first as the “armor of light” (13:12). Paul instructs us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:14).

A HOLY CONSPIRACY

A sad realization we reached in our congregation recently is that this holy Advent season often finds us lounging in our feet-in pajamas. The season of Advent is co-opted by the season of Tinsel—a season of selfishness, as we drop broad hints about the gifts we want for Christmas, and then drive to the “After Christmas Sales” to purchase for ourselves what our family failed to give us. It is a season of stress, as our calendars are over-booked and our credit cards are overtaxed. It is a season of hurry and short

tempers, as we warn our children that we may ask Santa to skip our house this year. We might as well sing, “Have yourselves a *crummy* little Christmas.”

Several years ago our congregation was blessed to discover the Advent Conspiracy movement that mourns the fact that our obsessive, consumption-focused Decembers cause us to sleep through Advent. This movement conspires against the forces of consumption and stress, creating time and space to *worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all*.¹

As our church has participated in Advent Conspiracy, we have endeavored to simplify our calendars to create more time for worshipping the newborn King. We have asked permission from family members and friends to not buy them gadgets they will never use, instead making gifts of money in their names to drill water wells in Kenya.

We have also emphasized giving handmade and relational gifts. A couple years ago, in addition to modest gifts under the tree, I gave each of my children an index card. On one side of the card I wrote what I admired most about them; on the other side I wrote about an activity I hoped to do with them in the coming weeks.

Advent Conspiracy has made a big difference among so many in our congregation, helping us to make good on the “debt of love” that Paul speaks about in Romans 13:8. It has helped us, in small but significant ways, to clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ and share the light of his attentive love with people near to us and far from us. It has helped us to traffic in a different kind of currency: less credit card debt and more personal investment. Best of all, when December 25 rolls around, we realize that we have not slept through the angelic choir and the summons to Bethlehem. Advent Conspiracy has taught us that the days of selfish indulgence in December are long past, in light of the fact that our salvation draws near. Our high privilege and holy responsibility is to clothe ourselves with Christ, extending his life saving love to others.

KNOWING WHAT TIME IT IS

A retired police detective, Yukio Shige, would be entitled to live out his golden years lounging around his home in his pajamas, doing crossword puzzles. But instead, he spends his days outfitted in white gloves, a floppy hat, and binoculars. He patrols the Tojinbo cliffs along the western coast of Japan, his eyes peeled for those solitary walkers who carry no camera to capture the amazing views, but rather hang their heads and stare at the ground. He focuses his binoculars on three specific spots on the cliffs where such walkers are most likely to leap to their death. Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, and the recent economic downturn has only exacerbated the problem.

When Shige sees someone whose appearance concerns him, he approaches them with a gentle “hello,” a smile, and a light touch on the shoulder. He invites them back to his office for tea and a sticky rice dish that often reminds

his guests of their childhood. Over a five year period, Yukio Shige's work has helped to thwart 188 potential suicides.²

Now there is a man who knows what time it is!

Around my house, there is one morning of the year when our children always wake up before their parents. They sleep fitfully on the evening of December 24, and the first child up sounds an alarm until all four of my children are at my door, asking if they can run downstairs and see what is under the Christmas tree. Who can blame them?

As they grow in their faith, my children are learning to listen to another alarm. The Spirit's call to the Church this Advent season is to listen for the ticking of the clock and remember that each day is a summons. The days of wasting hours in self-indulgence are long gone, and the coming of our salvation is just across the horizon. Advent gives us cause to wake up and conspire against those dark forces that war against our souls and keep our world in misery. The Spirit calls us to outfit ourselves with nothing less than the character of Jesus Christ, and to share his life-giving love with all those who are searching for hope.

NOTES

1 The Advent Conspiracy's Web site, www.adventconspiracy.org, offers plenty of resources for congregations. The "conspiracy" was the brainstorm of five pastors in 2006. The online project represents a collaboration among Rick McKinley of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon, Greg Holder from Windsor Crossing in St. Louis, Missouri, and Chris Seay of Ecclesia in Houston, Texas.

2 Yukio Shige's story is told in Coco Masters, "Postcard: Tojinbo Cliffs," *Time*, June 22, 2009, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1904132-2,00.html (accessed June 30, 2010).



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