

Taking Advent Seriously

BY MARK OLDENBURG

The season of Advent is widely ignored, being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas, or misunderstood as entirely a preparation for the Nativity. These four resources—wonderful guides for personal or group reflection—shine a reassuring light on the true nature of Advent, presenting healthy, faithful, and attractive ways to observe the season.

The past thousand years or so have not been kind to the season of Advent. The most obvious problem is Advent being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas. There is no need to complain once again about a culture and a church that begin celebrating Christmas on the Sunday after Thanksgiving (at the very latest), ignoring Advent entirely. About the only remnant of the season is the Advent calendar, and more and more of them picture rather than progressively reveal the Nativity.

But, being widely ignored is only one of Advent's problems. Even among the few who observe the season, many explain it as entirely a preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Now those cursed with knowledge of history know that this explanation twists around the development of the season. Back in the first millennium, apart from Rome, Advent seems to have been significantly older than Christmas. More to the point, however, this excludes all the eschatological emphases of Advent, all of the characters (like the adult John the Baptist) who prepare for the future coming of the Lord, and Isaiah's visions of all-inclusive, global, and even cosmic *shalom*. In fact, it excludes all those aids that would help keep the celebration of Christmas from vapid sentimentality, all those proclamations that remind us what it means that "the hopes and fears of all the years" were and are met in Bethlehem. Keeping Advent entirely as a preparation for Christmas empties not only Advent but Christmas of its meaning.

Another problem does not empty the two seasons of meaning, but twists them. That problem is celebrating Advent as a way of getting ready for the Nativity. By saying that “during these four weeks, we are preparing for Christ to be born,” we encourage make-believe in a way beyond even the purveyors of the Santa myth. Advent and Christmas become time machines,

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taking us back to the days before the Incarnation; and so we focus on the Nativity to the exclusion of everything else. Gone is the notion that we are in the “mean-time” between the Incarnation and the Eschaton. Gone is the opportunity for our honest cry that things are not as God has promised they would be. Gone even is the notion that God comes to us here and now, where we are, in our rush to pre-

tend our way back to “when Jesus was alive.” We may echo the prayers of those who awaited the Incarnation, but what we await is a different day of the already incarnated Lord.

A final problem for poor, beleaguered Advent is the season being overshadowed not by Christmas, but by Lent. Now that Advent has its own color in many traditions (and therefore its own iconography, rather than the Lenten violet vestments), and now that penitence has become one among many themes of Lent, rather than the sole preoccupation of that season, this problem is a bit diminished. But there are still those who yearn to celebrate Advent as joylessly as possible – a strange desire when confident hoping is one of the season’s central themes – and to make penitence as central to it as it once was to Lent.



Yet if the four resources reviewed here are any indication, things are looking up for Advent. In the midst of all these problems and dangers, they shine a reassuring light and fall into none of them. Even better, they present healthy, faithful, and attractive ways of observing Advent. This fidelity is all the more valuable since they present very different ways of keeping the season, and aim at four very different audiences. They witness to and reward the diversity of the delights of Advent. While all of them go beyond that season, providing devotional resources for the twelve days of Christmas and the festival of Epiphany, the bulk of each is spent in the four weeks of Advent.

Aimed at those who are interested in setting aside several times each day for individual prayer, Phyllis Tickle's *Christmastide: Prayers for Advent through Epiphany from The Divine Hours* (New York: Galilee, 2003, 272 pp., \$9.95) is in many ways the most straightforward. Taken from Tickle's larger manual, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (2000), the book is made up of prayers, psalms, and readings for use at morning, midday, and evening, together with a single service for each season to be used at bedtime. The services are complete—there is no need to transfer to a Bible or hymn book, nor is there space provided for additional intercessory prayers—and set up for individual use (although Tickle notes that changing "I's" to "we's" in prayers would allow for occasional corporate use as well). Each service begins with a Call to Prayer, Request for Presence, and Greeting (all scriptural), a short biblical reading and a psalm (interspersed with a refrain), a Cry of the Church, the Lord's Prayer, and concluding prayers. In the evening services, the reading is replaced with a hymn text.

The readings, hymns, and psalms are imaginatively chosen, reflecting seasonal themes well. This resource would be magnificent for an introvert because it rewards meditative digging into passages. Exactly for that reason, however, it requires of the user a certain familiarity with biblical themes and liturgical rhythms, and an ability and willingness to meditate on the passages presented without introduction or encouragement. It would not be a good choice for a seeker, nor for someone who expects the resource to spark intercessory prayer.



Mary Lou Redding's *While We Wait: Living the Questions of Advent* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002, 136 pp., \$12.00), on the other hand, is intended for use by the members of a group. The book provides a way for the daily reflections of each member to be brought together at a weekly meeting. It centers on a particular biblical story for each week and a question that is asked by one of the characters within that story. Redding provides an explanation and reflection on each week's story, as well as scripture passages, reflection questions, and breath prayers for each day between the weekly meetings. The stories of Tamar, Ruth, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the Annunciation, and the Magi are both well-chosen and well explained. In her weekly introduction, Redding does a fine job of setting the story within the larger narrative. A participant would not already need to be familiar with Scripture to understand the story and its context and to take part in the reflections.

The reflections are personal as well as biblical and would encourage both reflection and self-revelation from the members of the group. While the themes of social transformation and liberation are mentioned rarely in this resource, the theme of hope (especially personal hope) is dealt with

especially well. Since hope and hopelessness are so often tied up with childlessness in these stories, and since that issue could be a sensitive one in groups, Redding made the wise decision to leave that aspect of the theme to group discussion rather than commenting on it herself. It would have been good to include this issue, however, in the suggestions for group leadership. As is often the case, the suggestions for group organization and leadership are not particularly helpful. The stories and reflections are so powerful that a leader would be well advised simply to ask, “what occurred to you during your prayers this week?” and just get out of the way!



In *O Come Emmanuel: A Musical Tour of Daily Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006, 165 pp., \$15.95), Gordon Giles mines the magnificent musical heritage of Advent. He provides a scripture reading, musical example, and reflection for each day in Advent and Christmas. The musical examples are usually hymns that are provided, but in two cases where the example is a larger piece—J. S. Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* and Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—Giles describes the work rather than quoting it entire. Because the musical treasury of Advent is so rich, this resource is itself particularly rich as well, touching most of the themes of Advent, from expectation through *shalom*. Giles varies his commentaries, sometimes simply describing the musical work and its composition, sometimes waxing homiletic. The work only rarely betrays its English background by assuming familiarity with works unfamiliar to American readers. Unfortunately, several of those examples are in the first few days, so readers might need to be encouraged to stay with the program early on.

Those interested in music would be the natural readers of this work. It would be a wonderful devotional to use with choir members, for instance. It could be used individually, but discussion questions for a weekly gathering are provided. (Again, a good leader would do a better job on her own.) There are a few errors in fact—the Magnificat is not Mary’s response to the angel at the Annunciation, for instance. The reflections as a whole, however, are interesting, solid, and wide-ranging. And at least one—the second reflection on “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”—deserves to become a classic, especially among church musicians.



Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004, 330 pp., \$16.00), edited by members of the Bruderhof movement, is nothing but classics. Providing daily readings, appropriate to the season, from authors from John Chrysostom to Dorothee Soelle, it is hands down, full blown, knock your socks off magnificent.

The selections are of different lengths, from a few paragraphs to full sermons. There are no weekly themes, no set scriptural patterns, no discussion

questions, just meaty, accessible, varied, enjoyable meditations on Advent and its themes. Some of the authors are well known; the cover assures buyers that C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Annie Dillard, Madeleine L'Engle, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are represented. Others are known but unexpected, like Sylvia Plath. Some might be unknown to the reader – the collection starts with an article by the nineteenth-century German healer, evangelist, and social worker Christoph Friederich Blumhardt (may his tribe increase!) – but will not remain unknown for long.

This book is obviously intended for individual use, but the selections are so evocative that it would be difficult not to gather together to share favorite passages and trade insights with other readers. The Advent characteristic all of the authors share is a startling honesty. Alfred Delp's contribution begins, "There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up," and this collection provides the shaking. The authors disagree with each other, and with the reader's preconceptions, in a most lively, inviting, refreshing, and salutary way.

Each of these books provides an entry into the delights and gifts of Advent. Each of them guarantees that the themes of hoping, waiting, rejoicing, and preparing are explored and enjoyed. Each of them assures that the characters of Advent – Mary, John the Baptist, Elizabeth, Nicholas of Myra, Lucy, and many others – become familiar friends and models. Each takes Advent seriously, and invites us to do the same. Each is a wonderful companion and guide for this season when our business is to recognize that we live in the meantime, when the promises of God are already but not yet fulfilled. Each helps us to cry out, with heart, hand, and voice, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."



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