



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT & WORLD AIDS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction – Brief History of Advent

Advent is the first part of a larger liturgical season that includes Christmas and Epiphany, and continues until the beginning of Lent. Traditionally, the four Sundays prior to Christmas and the Sunday closest to November 30th mark the beginning of the season of Advent (from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming”), as well as the church year of most Western Christian churches (Eastern Christian churches use September 1 as the beginning). Initially, Advent was a forty day period of penitence, fasting and confession as a means of spiritual preparation for the “coming” of the “Nativity of Jesus Christ.”

For Christians, Advent is the time when the church patiently prepares for the coming of Jesus Christ. However, it is not simply about waiting for the birth of Christ. The Advent season focuses on Christ's *threefold* coming:

- Past: It was predicted by Prophets, and then the Lord was born in Bethlehem two-thousand plus years ago;
- Present: Christ comes to us again and again through the Word, the Sacrament and the Holy Spirit; and,
- Future: We await the final coming when Christ shall set all things in order and when we shall be with him throughout eternity. During Advent we ponder all three comings and our role and behavior relative to each of these moments. So we prepare.

Prepare Ye the Way

REFRAIN

Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord.

Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord.

STANZA 1

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (REFRAIN)

STANZA 2

Fill ev'ry valley, bring all mountains low. (REFRAIN)

STANZA 3

Go up to a mountain and shout with a loud voice. (REFRAIN)

STANZA 4

Say to all people, here is your God.¹

From the perspective of spiritual purification, Advent was not unlike the season of Lent which begins forty days before Easter. In the mid-ninth century, Advent was shortened to its current format.



In contemporary Christian worship, Advent has a dual symbolic purpose. It pays homage to both the Hebrew tradition of waiting for the coming of the Messiah as well as the singularly Christian

concept of waiting for the second coming of Christ on Judgment Day. The period of Advent was thought of as a time of “darkness” when the world had strayed from the “Word of God.” Consequently, each of the four Sundays of Advent is marked with the lighting of a candle mounted in a wreath known as an “Advent wreath.” This custom began in Eastern Europe with pre-Christian Germanic people who during cold, dark Decembers made wreaths of evergreen and lighted fires as symbols of hope in the anticipation of the arrival of spring. By the sixteenth century, the Christian Church had adopted these symbols to mark their hope for the coming of the Messiah, the world’s true light.² The Advent wreath holds in a circle four candles: three purple (violet or blue) and one pink. The candles in succession represent “hope,” “peace,” “joy,” and “love.” In the center of the wreath is a white candle called the “Christ candle” which is not lit until the first service of Christmas Eve.

Another Advent ritual is the cleaning of the home and the church in preparation for the coming of the Messiah on Christmas. Personally, I associate Advent with venetian blinds. In my mother’s house, the cleaning of the home during this period took on an intensity unmatched throughout the rest of the year. The windows and accompanying venetian blinds had to sparkle like the lights of the forth coming Christmas tree. It was not until junior high school and my studies for confirmation⁴ that I began to associate our ritual at home with the Church’s Advent rituals on December Sundays.

Other Advent traditions include the performance of George Friedrich Händel’s “Messiah,” and in churches with a pipe organ, the silencing of the Great Trumpet stop. Händel’s masterpiece of the European classical tradition is an Advent staple at many African American congregations. In 1957, Tindley Temple, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, began the Advent tradition of performing “Messiah.” It is noteworthy that the church bears the name of its founding pastor, Charles A. Tindley, an influential figure in the early history of African American gospel music. Whereas the performance of “Messiah” by black church choirs is now commonplace, Tindley Temple is unique in its fifty year history of consecutive performances, usually on the first Sunday of Advent.

II. World AIDS Day by Ralph Wheeler

It is fitting that World AIDS Day falls so close to the first Sunday of Advent. Many churches, especially African American churches, have been, and still are, slow to embrace sufferers of AIDS. I live in Oakland, California. For more than twenty years, this area of the country has been inundated with persons with HIV and with persons who died from AIDS. In fact, for most of the 80’s, given the large numbers of gay men in this area who died from AIDS, it was thought to be a gay, white male disease. Although we now know this is ridiculous and that the largest number of new AIDS cases reported in the last two years among ethnic groups in America has been among African American women, the homophobia that was so tied to the disease in its early years still exists, especially in the black church. The stigma and shame associated with this disease, in some cases, even led families, including mothers and fathers, to abandon their children; property owners to rise up in protest against attempts to locate AIDS healing and care centers in their neighborhoods (of course, any such blanket prohibition would violate federal

civil rights laws for the disabled); and, pastors to preach mean-spirited sermons berating AIDS sufferers and declaring that AIDS is the meted justice and wrath of God against unrepentant homosexuals. Many of these same people who did so much harm, undoubtedly, went to church many an Advent Sunday with an expectant spirit claiming godliness and holiness.

Initially, these uncaring responses to this impending epidemic, which were often cloaked in fear and homophobia, were tolerated by the larger American society. Sometime, the negative response was even more pronounced in the African American community. But, as the disease spread to the larger community--women, babies, hemophiliacs, and others--a more reasoned and caring approach was obviously necessary.

Even the most disgruntled homophobic protester or preacher could not convince the public that God was punishing unborn babies, women, including married women who were the unknowing partners of infected males, or helpless hemophiliacs, by afflicting them with the AIDS virus because they had performed some evil act.

In the African American community, the number of AIDS infected individuals has risen to epidemic proportions, especially among black women. Is God punishing these individuals because of their bad acts? Is God rewarding the rest of us because we are perfect Christians? What happened to the love of God? Is that not the love we seek, when we enter the season of Advent?

Surely, the hope, peace, joy and love represented by the Church during the season of Advent, as the Church waits for its expectant Savior, is broad enough to cover our brothers and sisters with HIV/AIDS and to cover us as their keepers. Jesus, the builder and creator of the Church, without showing any concern for the nature or type of illness one had, healed all manner of diseases, during his earthly ministry. He also said his disciples—are we not they—would do even greater things than he had done. Could that mean finding a cure for AIDS, or giving loving care and attention to an AIDS sufferer?

Surely, today's Advent Church--the expectant Church--believes and knows that God still performs miracles. As reminders, I will name a few: (1) the polio vaccine which cured hundreds of thousands around the world and now prevents and contains the spread of the disease; (2) blood plasma has saved the lives of countless thousands, if not millions; although, due to race prejudice, it was denied to the very man, Dr. Charles Drew, who discovered the medical miracle and perfected its usage; and (3) heart, lung and kidney transplants.

If AIDS is not beyond the reach of God, it is not beyond the reach of our love. The season of Advent is a perfect time for the Church to cleanse itself of its judgmental spirit, and to work to give hope, joy, peace and love to our communities of AIDS sufferers and their loved ones. Then, we will be spreading the true spirit of Advent. And, when the Christ we expect arrives, we will be able to tell him we shared his spirit of love as he directed.

III. "Only Believe" persons living with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

Only Believe,

Only Believe,

All things are possible, only believe.

“Only Believe” that there will be a cure for AIDS (Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

Only Believe

STANZA 1

Fear not, little flock, from the cross to the throne,
From death into life he went for his own;
All power in earth, all power above,
Is given to him for the flock of his love.

REFRAIN

Only believe, only believe;
All things are possible, only believe,
Only believe, only believe;
All things are possible, only believe.

STANZA 2

Fear not, little flock, he goeth ahead,
Your Shepherd selecteth the path you must tread;
The waters of Marah he'll sweeten for thee,
he drank all the bitter in Gethsemane. *Refrain*

STANZA 3

Fear not, little flock, whatever your lot,
He enters all rooms, “the doors being shut,”
He never forsakes; he never is gone,
So count on his presence in darkness and dawn. *Refrain.*⁵

Almost 25 years ago when people started dropping dead from an unknown disease, activists and scientist pressured a few politicians in the face of a silent President Ronald Reagan to find funds for research for a cure.

The origin of the HIV virus is unknown. Neither is the number of persons infected with this virus that causes the body's system that wards off disease to stop functioning. One of the early signs of the presence of the virus was a rare form of a benign skin cancer [Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS)], which, prior to March 1981, was occasionally found in the elderly. KS, as well as pneumocistis pneumonia, began to be identified in young gay males in New York and later California. By mid-1982, the disease was documented on five continents, North America, South America, Europe, Africa and Australia.⁶

Slowly, work began to identify what today is known as the HIV virus. “Only Believe.” Subsequently, drugs were developed to combat this monstrous virus and have stemmed the early tide of deaths that laid devastation upon the Black community and the Black Church. First, choirs lost tenors, then a wave of organists, followed by a host of baritones, not to mention the

pew members of the congregation. Those who were infected with the disease were treated much like the Gibeonites in our lection text. Guide us, O Thou Great Jehovah.

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand;
bread of heaven, feed me 'til I want no more;
bread of heaven, feed me 'til I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through;
strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield;
strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side;
songs of praises, I will ever give to thee;
songs of praises, I will ever give to thee.⁷

IV. A Balm in Gilead

After much stirring by Prenessa Seale and her “Balm in Gilead” organization (originally the Harlem Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS Project), black churches finally got the courage to own up to and have meaningful dialogue around the subject of an AIDS epidemic in the black community. The Balm in Gilead is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization whose mission is to improve the health status of people of the African Diaspora by building the capacity of faith communities to address life-threatening diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. The Balm in Gilead's pioneering achievements, including mobilizing The Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS for over 19 years, have enabled thousands of churches to become leaders in preventing the transmission of HIV by providing comprehensive educational programs and offering compassionate support to encourage those infected to seek and maintain treatment. It also developed the *Our Church Lights the Way: The Black Church HIV Testing Campaign*.⁸ Other programs provided by Balm in Gilead include:

- Faith-Based HIV/AIDS National Technical Assistance Center
- Denominational Leadership Initiative
- Black Church HIV/AIDS Training Institute
- The Black Church HIV/AIDS Network
- Our Church Lights The Way: HIV Testing Campaign

- The ISIS Project - *The mission of the ISIS Project is to educate and empower black women about HPV and cervical cancer. The vision is to create optimal health and wellness throughout the life cycle of black women.*
- It also offers training and toolkits to establish and strengthen HIV ministries, and products and free liturgical resources to churches to assist them in addressing HIV/AIDS in their congregations (balmingilead.org). Possible resources and products are:
 - a. “How To Develop Sermons Addressing HIV,” an article written by The Rev. Dr. James Forbes for The Balm in Gilead, Inc.
 - b. The Black Church Speaks! A Collection of Historical Sermons on HIV/AIDS a collection of sermons featuring some of the nation's most well-known preachers, including Rev. James Forbes, Pastor T.D. Jakes, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright.

There Is a Balm in Gilead

REFRAIN

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.

STANZA 1

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

Refrain

STANZA 2

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all.

*Refrain*⁹

V. The AIDS Patchwork Quilt Song

Someone followed the lead of the ancestors who with scraps of cloth stitched together formed a blanket. Each scrap bore the name of one of those who lost their battle with AIDS. The AIDS Quilt was born and Michelle Lancaster wrote a song titled “Patchwork Quilt” about the quilt.



Patchwork Quilt

They unfolded your lives one by one
They laid out your patchwork under the sun
And people gathered from miles around
To witness your quilt spread on the ground

REFRAIN:

And then they called out your name (3x)
Oh and you will live forever
You know that I'll be loving you just like a patchwork quilt

Well there were men and women, mothers and fathers
Sisters and brothers, daughters and sons
And children and babies, and lovers and friends
They all lay before me sewn into one

Your lives had meaning, your lives had joy
You touched so many people, many more than you will know
And you wrapped yourselves around me
As I walked down these rows
You're letting me feel your beautiful souls

REFRAIN:

I feel the warmth of your lives (2x)
Oh and you will live forever
You know that I'll be loving you just like a patchwork quilt

My heart spills over, flowing with tears
I cry for your suffering and for your shortened years
And I'll take you with me as I walk away
Remembering you who have died with AIDS

REFRAIN:

Yes, I remember your names (2x)
Oh, and you will live forever
You know that I'll be loving you
Just like a patchwork quilt
I'll be loving you like a patchwork quilt.¹⁰

VI. It's Advent – Be Ready!

Just as over two millennia ago, John the Baptist preached in the desert that the Messiah was coming, Christians believe that the Messiah is coming to earth again to save believers; so, we had "better be ready" for we know not the day, nor the hour that the Son of Man shall return.

Better Be Ready

REFRAIN

Better be ready, Better be ready;
Better be ready, ready to put on your long white robe

STANZA 1

Oh! Rise up children, get your crown;
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)
And by your Saviour's side sit down.
(Ready to put on your long white robe!) *Refrain*

STANZA 2

What a glorious morning that will be,
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)
Our friends and Jesus we shall see
(Ready to put on your long white robe!) *Refrain*

STANZA 3

O shout you Christians, you're gaining ground,
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)
We'll shout old Satan's kingdom down!
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)

STANZA 4

I soon shall reach that golden shore,
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)
And sing the songs we sang before
(Ready to put on your long white robe!)¹¹

Just as God in God's own time, "heeded supplications for the land," as indicated in our lection reading for today, "Only Believe" that in God's own time, the Messiah will return, and God will bring about a cure for AIDS. In fact, if the Church gets on one accord, the cure for HIV/AIDS may very well "come" to us long before our Lord returns. We must also never forget that he returns to us daily, if we seek him. And, Advent teaches us to have an expectant spirit. As we wait for his return and for a cure, we need God to be our constant guide.

Notes

1. "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord." Advent song.
2. Hoagland, Victor. Christmas Prayers and Customs. Melville, NY: Passionist Missionaries & Regina Press, 1990.
3. The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church. New York: Church Hymnal Corp. and the Seabury Press, 1977. p.160
4. An order of service in mainline denominations in which the candidate, "when they are ready and have been duly prepared, ...make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and ...receive the laying on of hands by the bishop." Episcopal Church. The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church. New York: Church Hymnal Corp. and the Seabury Press, 1977. p. 412; See also, "Advent." Wikipedia. Online location: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent> accessed 30 April 2008; Cambridge Dictionaries Cambridge University Press. Online location: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/results.asp?searchword=preparation&x=0&y=0&=>

5. "Only Believe." By Paul Rader. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001.
6. "History of AIDS up to 1986." Avert. Online location: http://www.avert.org/his81_86.htm accessed 23 April 2008; McNutt, N. S., V. Fletcher, and M. A. Conant. "Early lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma in homosexual men. An ultrastructural comparison with other vascular proliferations in skin." American Journal of Pathology, 1983 April; 111(1): 62–77. Online location: <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1916204> accessed April 23, 2008.
7. Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah. Lyrics by William Williams. Traditional Common Meter.
8. Balm in Gilead. HIV/AIDS Awareness Program.
Online location: <http://balmingilead.org/programs/weekofprayer2008/>
9. There Is a Balm in Gilead. US slave spiritual
10. The Aids Patchwork Quilt Song. By Michelle Lanchester
11. Better Be Ready. U.S slave spiritual. © 1936 Paul A. Schmitt Music Company. Copyright assigned to Belwin Mills