



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History/Historical Documents (and Word Etymology)

At its most basic definition, “advent” means simply a coming—into place, view, being—or an arrival. That is, advent is the expectation of something about to take shape, form or appear. As a proper noun, “Advent” refers more specifically to the arrival or approaching of the Christmas season. Each year Advent takes place during the four weeks that precede Christmas. Christian churches celebrate Advent through a variety of rituals including: the lighting of candles, performing of pageants and concerts, and the collective singing of those hymns singled out as best capturing the “reason for the season.” Through all of these sundry activities, congregations prepare to celebrate the coming of the Christ child, the birth of the baby Jesus.

In that these liturgical practices are geared towards gathering the hearts and minds of Christians for the birth of Jesus, Advent can be seen to possess a certain theological richness. In its approach to the Christmas holiday, Advent is intended to prepare Christians for the coming of Christ into the world, to remind believers of the incarnation and the fact that central to the

Christian faith is a belief that God abides immanently with God's creation. In short, Advent serves to shore up in Christians a confidence that God is with us—Emmanuel. Additionally, while Christmas functions to memorialize the birth of Jesus, in the words of John's gospel, the moment in which "the word became flesh," for a twenty-first century church, Advent also orients celebrants expectantly towards the anticipated return of a resurrected Christ. In this regard, Advent uniquely captures the manner in which Christian faith is defined by a hope built on that which is already (the birth of Jesus) and that which is not yet (Christ's return), a faith that is both incarnational and eschatological.¹

II. Autobiographical Story

Perhaps indicative of the manner in which the Christmas season has become intertwined and enmeshed with the commercial culture that defines so much of American society, including our churches, one of my most vivid childhood memories of the Advent season is of a peculiar commodity called, fittingly, the Advent calendar. As I recall, these calendars were twenty-four days in length beginning around the first of December and culminating on Christmas Day. For every day of the Advent season there was a designated door on the calendar; and, as each day passed, I would open a new door to find a small surprise. Typically, the calendars that I received were made out of a thin cardboard material, designed dramatically in Christmas colors to attract the eye of a child. Inside this inviting exterior was a plastic liner intended to preserve the calendar's treasured feature: little pieces of chocolate. With each day came a little more anticipation, as I would peel open a new door to find a unique candy surprise. While some might question the spiritual value of these calendars—there are both secular and religious Advent calendars—within the broader context of the season they helped to cultivate a culture of anticipation, excitement and expectancy that ultimately culminated not with gifts under the Christmas tree (or a cavity for that matter), but with a celebration of the Christ child's arrival, Emmanuel, God with us. Similarly, during the season of Advent Christians are encouraged to cultivate a posture of anticipation of the unfolding revelation of God's purposes and plans in their lives.

III. An Illustration from African American History

More generally, African American history, both sacred and secular, has been defined by an "already, not yet" quality. In my own research on African American religion and the arts, my attention has been directed to the manner in which the creative and critical imaginations of black artists have been oriented towards the goals of freedom in the future; yet, at the same time, they have sought to embody and perform that freedom in the present, even amid social circumstances that at times continued to deny their very humanity. More pointedly, even as they hoped their work might aid the cause of social justice for African Americans living in a white supremacist society, they affirmed the importance of individual freedom in the present, amidst the efforts of some—blacks and whites—to censure their creativity and constrain their artistic independence.

For example, during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, the world witnessed a flourishing of black cultural production never before imagined. Many of the African American artists who comprised this movement understood themselves as putting forward an image of a respectable "New Negro" distant from the stigmas of slavery. In doing so, they believed they

might help bring about the advent of a new day in American society wherein black people were embraced as fully human and not as the caricatures of popular cultural images seen in such films and plays as D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation (1915) and Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures (1930). With these negative images on the one hand and the expectations of race leaders that black artists create solely positive images on the other, many young black artists found themselves torn between perceived loyalties to "the race" and the call of artistic freedom. Seeking a way out of this dilemma, a young Langston Hughes crafted a response in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." He wrote:

*We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.*³

Hughes's commentary powerfully reflected the "already, not yet" quality of black life. Writing in the 1920s, he lived at the height of segregated Jim and Jane Crow society. He was not unfamiliar with the rule of the lynch mob, and he knew well the class and cultural conflicts that shaped black America during a moment of dramatic social change fostered by the Great Migration, from south to north and from country to city. Moreover, it would be roughly forty years before cries of "Black is beautiful" would ring out as a rallying cry among African American youth. Yet, Langston Hughes saw the need to claim an aesthetic freedom for himself that had not yet appeared in history. Hughes argued that black artists ought to prepare their temples for tomorrow; yet, at the same time that he anticipated the arrival of that day, he determined to proclaim that freedom for himself in the present.

Similarly, as seen in the Advent season, Christians find themselves cognizant of the reality of God's presence in the present, yet called forward by the promise of a more full revelation of God that has not yet been realized.

IV. Songs that Speak to the Moment

A. O Come, O Come Emmanuel

If Advent is the name of the season indicative of an expectant hope for the appearance of the Christ child, then certainly the name of the hour is Emmanuel. In scripture, Jesus is described by many designations: messiah, prince of peace, rabbi, teacher, and wonderful counselor to name just a few. However, taken from the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Immanu'el," Emmanuel literally means "God with us." This week's lectionary reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah is read by Christians as a precursor to Matthew's gospel which, in its first chapter, records the prophecy, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." (Matthew 1:23). As a fitting Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" celebrates the first century incarnation of God in the Christ child. Yet, it also expresses the hope and faith of the present day Christian that God is

with us too, as the songwriter pens, “Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.” Whatever that particular dark day looks like—be it experienced as the individual despairs of a broken relationship, drug addiction, or a lost job or home; or as collective community ailments of disproportionately high levels of incarceration, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or underfunded schools—this hymn captures both the call upon God and the confidence that God will respond to the plea of God’s people.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

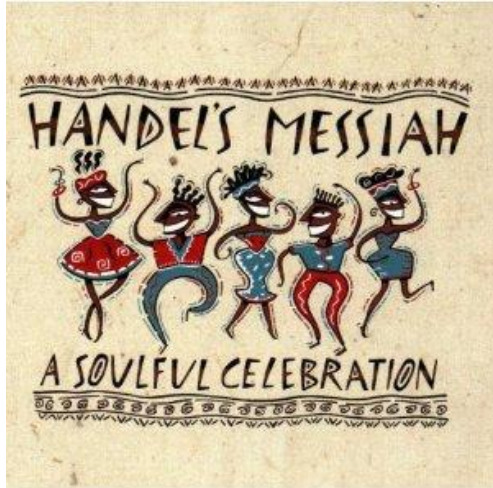
O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan’s tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory o’er the grave
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might,
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai’s height,
In ancient times didst give the Law
In cloud, and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

B. Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration



Although Advent is still not a familiar staple of the Christmas rituals celebrated in African American congregations, in recent years a black Advent celebration did achieve critical acclaim in mainstream American popular culture with the 1992 release of Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration. Characteristic of the African American cultural practice of remaking Euro-American classics in its own image, A Soulful Celebration re-imagines the most famous work of the German composer George F. Handel, baptizing several of its songs in the rhythms and cadences of gospel and R&B. Under the direction of Quincy Jones and featuring such celebrated black secular and sacred musical artists as Darryl Coley and Dianne Reeves, Tramaine Hawkins

and Al Jarreau, Tevin Campbell and Commissioned, the Clark Sisters and Stevie Wonder among others, it was no surprise that the compilation garnered a Grammy award. Moreover, the album located itself within the long history of black music as track one offered “a partial history of black music” and the final song involved all of the contributors, in the form of a gospel choir, singing Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus, with Quincy Jones conducting.

Most relevant to this week’s lectionary reading, the seventh song on A Soulful Celebration featured Howard Hewett, best known for his role as lead singer of early-1980s R&B group, Shalamar. In a short but memorable rendition, Hewett offered his gospel-inflected take on scene four of Handel’s Messiah: “Prophecy of the Virgin Birth.”

Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive

Behold, a virgin shall conceive
 And bear a son,
 And shall call his name,
 Emanuel,
 God with us.

Oh, God be with us, I’m calling you father
 Hallelujah
 C’mon on down now, and see about me
 Hallelujah
 Calling you Father, hey...
 Hallelujah

Behold, a virgin shall conceive,
 And bear a son,
 And shall call his name,
 Emanuel.

Behold, a virgin shall conceive
 Oh, and bear a son

And shall call his name,
Hallelujah
Oh, Hallelujah, I'm calling you Father
Hallelujah,
I love you heavenly Father
Hallelujah, Call you Father
Hallelujah,
Emanuel.

Hallelujah, I praise your name
Hallelujah,
I love you heavenly Father
Come on and see about me, hallelu
Hallelujah,
Emanuel
Hallelujah, Praise your name
Hallelujah,
I love you heavenly Father
C'mon, c'mon, c'mon and see about me.

V. A Practice that Creates a Memorable Learning Moment

As has already been noted, Advent is a high time amidst the rhythms of the Christian calendar, and it is marked as such by a myriad of rituals in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. One such practice is the lighting of the four Advent candles—one on each of the season's Sundays—followed by a fifth and final candle on Christmas or Christmas Eve. While their meanings may vary from church to church, part of this ritual involves assigning a different Advent-related theme to each candle, which can be used to guide reflections leading up to Christmas.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church at which I served while in seminary and the historic Charles Street AME Church in Boston's Roxbury neighbourhood, made this Advent ritual especially significant in the life of its congregation. As is customary, a particular theme is assigned to each candle. The themes progress as follows: *Promise*, *Preparation*, *Anticipation*, and *Proclamation*. In this logical order, Advent begins with the promise of the birth of the Christ child, proceeds with an appropriate congregational response of preparation for that arrival, which is then followed by a posture of anticipation. Finally, the fourth candle brings Advent to a close by proclaiming the good news that God is indeed with us! Additionally, Charles Street adds special meaning to this ritual by inviting the newest members of its ministerial staff to offer brief meditations on each theme. As such, newly licensed ministers or seminarians preparing for their initial sermons and interviews with steward boards, are granted the opportunity speak briefly before a supportive congregation. In a sense, these exchanges add another layer to the advent season. As the congregation affirms the promise of a new ministry, the aspiring preacher begins his or her preparations, and both parties anticipate a vocation that is defined by proclaiming the good news of God's presence in the world.

Notes

1. For an excellent online Advent resource, see Liturgies.net Online location: <http://www.liturgies.net/Advent/advent.htm> accessed 20 May 2010
2. For additional reading on the Advent season, see Bonheoffer, Dietrich, et al. Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.
3. Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist And the Racial Mountain." Ed. Gates, Henry L., and Nellie Y. McKay. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996. pp. 1267-1271.