



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT AND OFFICERS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Ralph Wheeler, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Long time civil rights activist and resident of Oakland, CA

I. Historical Background

Today, the African American Lectionary celebrates and highlights the third Sunday of Advent and Church Officers' Day. The Lectionary planners were quite purposeful when they placed these two events together on the black church's Christian calendar. However, if one is not careful, it is easy to miss their intent—to acknowledge the interconnectedness and common threads that bind these two liturgical moments.

First, the birth of Jesus Christ is one of the most important events in all of Christendom. His birth, ordained from the beginning of time, is a central part of the foundation of the Christian faith. The birth of Christ set the stage for everything that follows on the Christian calendar. His birth was the fulfillment of Scripture and a necessary precedent to his miracles, death, burial, resurrection, and heavenly ascendancy. Now, the church prepares itself and waits with expectancy for his triumphant return as Savior and judge.

The Church uses Advent to commemorate his birth and to place the world on notice that the Church is in a state of anticipatory preparation as it waits for his second coming and the second fulfillment of Scripture. The church's focus on the love of Jesus, at this time, is only exceeded by the love he displayed by his death on the cross.

All church officers—including, but not limited to, deacons, trustees, Sunday School superintendents, ministers of music, usher board presidents, choir directors, lay leaders, nursery supervisors, stewards, Christian education officers, leaders of the nurses guild, finance team, tape, technology and publication ministries, etc.—are all caretakers or stewards of the work begun by Christ. They are entrusted with providing leadership for the physical and spiritual needs of the body of Christ—the Church. Their work serves one purpose and one purpose only: kingdom building for Christ.

Historically in the black church, many congregations have selected their new church leaders and officers for the coming year just prior to the Christmas holiday season. Until

the New Year begins, these new church leaders and officers are in a period of anticipation, preparation and waiting as we all are during the Advent season. Thus, the pairing of the third Sunday of Advent with Church Officers' Day is not only purposeful, it is appropriate. It allows the church to honor its current leaders and officers for their past work. And, since Advent focuses on why Jesus came to this world and why the Church anticipates his return, the third Sunday of Advent/Church Officers' Day provides the Church with a great teaching moment. During this season, the Church can make it plain to its new officers and itself that the total focus of all of their work should be Christ-centered—that the coming triumphant Christ will judge their work and each worker.

Third Sunday of Advent/Church Officers' Day is the time to remind the institutional Church¹ and its officers that:

You may build great cathedrals large or
small, you can build sky-scrapers grand
and tall, you may conquer all the failures
of the past, but only what you do for Christ
will last.

Remember only what you do for Christ will
last. Remember only what you do for Christ
will last. Only what you do for him will be
counted at the end; only what you do for
Christ will last!²

II. The Need for Institutionalization

It is also significant that the Lectionary planners placed all four Sundays of Advent on the African American Lectionary. All four Sundays of Advent are seldom given serious attention in historically black churches. The Lectionary planners' foresight sets a new standard for black church life. It is a purposeful nod towards elevating the season of Advent in the black church. It is an attempt to expand the black church's list of honored traditions.

The formal or institutional black church is more than 250 years old.³ The first black congregation, a Baptist church, was founded in the last half of the eighteenth century.⁴ The first independent black denominations formed in the United States were Methodist.⁵ The Pentecostal movement that led to the founding of the black Pentecostal church began sometime around the early 1900s. Since these founding moments, the black church has installed thousands of church officers and has witnessed hundreds of Advent seasons.

Notwithstanding its long history, the black church has not fully embraced all four Sundays of Advent—the full Advent season. Some congregations do not highlight the season at all. They tend to go directly from Thanksgiving to Christmas, with barely a mention of Advent. Many other black congregations only celebrate the first Sunday of Advent, treating it similar to any other **single** liturgical moment (e.g., Father's Day,

Thanksgiving, or Church Anniversary) on the congregation's calendar. However, unlike these liturgical moments, Advent is not a single day; it is a season.

Considering the theological purpose of Advent, as described above, there is a need to institutionalize this important season in the bloodstream and life of the black church. The black church does not have to reinvent the wheel to institutionalize the Advent season. It need only parody for Advent what has been done for the Lenten (Easter) season. The Lenten season does not start with Easter morning. It ends there. Likewise, Advent does not start with Christmas morning. It ends there. Thus, all church departments should make a special effort to keep the congregation engaged with the purpose and spirit of Advent for the entire Advent season. Celebrating Church Officers' Day with an expectant and hopeful spirit on the third or fourth Sunday of Advent is one way of doing that.

III. Christmas Can Wait

Frequently, by the time the first, second and third Sundays of Advent have been celebrated in the black church, the congregation is more than ready to get to the main event—Christmas Day.

On the two Sundays before Christmas, the Cradle Roll Choir is ready to sing "Away in A Manger." The actors for the Christmas play are waiting in the wings for the rise of the curtain. The Cathedral Choir is waiting to sing "Silent Night," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," and "Joy to the World." The Gospel Choir is anxiously waiting to raise the rafters with "Rise Up Shepherds and Follow." The ushers are poised to pin each congregant as he/she enters the sanctuary with red and green holiday lapel bows. The music department is prepared to give the congregation what it wants—Christmas music. And, the youth department is waiting to surprise the congregation with its version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain." All minds are on the lights and merriment of Christmas. Often, even the pastor joins the Christmas parade. His/her sermon might begin with the Virgin Mary; however, it often ends somewhere in Bethlehem on Christmas Day. **But, it is not Christmas! It is still Advent season. Christmas can wait.**

With few exceptions, this rush toward Christmas occurs every year in thousands of black churches, while the last candle of Advent flickers dimly at the back of some churches. The pairing of Church Officers' Day with a Sunday of Advent has the potential to slow this rush towards Christmas. **Christmas can wait. It is still Advent.**

IV. A History of Anticipation, Preparation and Waiting



In an effort to create more understanding of some of the issues associated with the spirits of anticipation, preparation and waiting which are central to the Advent season, congregations can create Advent Sunday programs that draw upon the struggles and different cultural aspects of African American history. For example, those programs could focus on some of the following:

- a. Slaves anticipating and waiting to be freed;
- b. Ex-slaves preparing themselves for freedom;
- c. Blacks fighting and waiting for the right to vote;
- d. Blacks anticipating, preparing and waiting to be allowed to join the American military;
- e. African Americans fighting and waiting for the end of segregation;
- f. Black women preachers fighting, preparing and waiting to be afforded the same pastoral, preaching, and other rights and opportunities in the black church that are afforded black male preachers and pastors; and
- g. Blacks anticipating and waiting for a black president.

Many other aspects of African American history can be added to this list to provide congregations with a familiar and hands-on understanding of what it means to anticipate, prepare for and wait on the coming of the Lord. Military veterans, former civil rights workers, senior citizens and other members of the congregation can have their personal stories and experiences videotaped and shared with the church.

In addition, these types of programs can be enhanced by the skillful addition of appropriate cultural presentations from different African American art forms (e.g., art, including painting and sculpture; dance; music, including spirituals, work songs, gospel, blues, ballads, rock and roll, jazz, opera, rap and hip hop; poetry; folktales; and, classic sermons). The Norton Anthology of African American Literature⁶ is a major resource that program planners and worship leaders can use to design programs of this type.

V. Breaking with Tradition

Just as the Lectionary planning team broke with tradition and paired Church Officers' Day with the third Sunday of Advent, pastors, church officers, lay and worship leaders, ministers of music and congregations can break with tradition and try new liturgical formats on that day. The following are some ideas on how to do this. They can be tailored to the needs of your specific congregation:

A. Advent Officers' Day Service

Consider designing a third Sunday Advent/Church Officers' Day Service. It can be modeled after the traditional Watch Night Service where prayer, testimonials and congregational singing are important to the service. However, in this service, the focus would be on Christ's love for the world, his expected return, and the new church officers. If your service is held on the third Sunday of Advent, remember that the typical theme of focus is joyous anticipation.

The service should be designed to be appealing to all age groups of the church. Different types of dance, poetry and music should be woven into the fabric of the morning, afternoon or evening services. It can even be held on a Wednesday or a Saturday.

At some point during the program, the congregation can be divided into separate groups according to age (e.g., children, teenagers, young adults, seniors, male, female, etc.). Movies, games, lectures and exercises that relate to the theme of the evening can be used in the groups to explain the Advent message, explain the role of the church's officers for the new year and allow persons to sign up to participate in auxiliaries, boards and groups.

Songs for the Advent Officers' Day Service may include:

Let's Just Praise the Lord

Let's just praise the Lord! Let's just lift our hands
t'ward heaven and praise the Lord; Let's just
praise the Lord, praise the Lord! Let's just lift our
hands t'ward heaven and praise the lord.⁷

While We Are Waiting Come

Verse

While we are waiting, come; while we are Waiting, come.
With pow'r and glory, come; with pow'r and glory.
Come. Come, Savior, quickly come; Come, Savior, quickly
Come.

Chorus

Jesus, our Lord, Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come.⁸

Please see the Lectionary worship services for all four Sundays of Advent. The services contain more than fifty other songs from which you can select.

B. Advent Season Foot Washing Service

Invite the entire church to participate in a foot washing ceremony. With the pastor and officers leading the ceremony, the congregation should wash and anoint each other's feet. Have the pastor and officers provide the congregation with oral and written information explaining the meaning and tradition of the ceremony.

C. Placing the Focus on Being Like Christ

Using a trained and prepared group facilitator, design a small group exercise that focuses on showing joy through love and sharing. This should be a highly structured exercise conducted in a room large enough to allow the participants to be seated in chairs in groups of ten. The chairs should be arranged in circles.

When starting the exercise, the facilitator should state the basic ground rules for the exercise: (1) all instructions will be given by the facilitator; (2) each group will be assigned a monitor who will record in writing the work of that group; and, (3) no one is to verbally evaluate the statements of any other participant of any group. Then:

1. Participants should be asked to break up randomly into groups of ten.
2. Once the groups are formed, the facilitator should ask the participants to identify themselves by their first names to each other. This should happen concurrently for all groups. Allow ten minutes for this part of the exercise.
3. Once the get acquainted portion of the exercise is completed, the facilitator should ask all participants to close their eyes and to keep them closed until he/she tells them to reopen their eyes.
4. Once all eyes are closed, the facilitator tells the participants to imagine that each participant just received an unexpected gift of \$25,000.00 dollars. The instructions from the giver is that each person may either take a luxury vacation with ten persons of their choosing, elect to spend the money in any other manner he or she wishes to spend it, or elect to forego the money. If a person chooses to accept the money, he/she must decide now how the money will be spent and it must all be spent within 24 hours.
5. The facilitator instructs the participants to remain quiet and to keep their eyes closed. The facilitator informs the participants that they have 10 minutes to make their decisions about the gift.
6. Once the 10 minutes have elapsed, the facilitator asks the participants to open their eyes and, as called upon by the group monitors, each participant is asked to tell his/her group monitor what he/she decided to do with the money or whether they decided that they did not want to accept the money. Once the monitors have collected this information, the facilitator asks the participants to answer the following questions by raising their hands:
 - a. How many people chose to take the luxury trip with ten other people?
 - b. How many people chose to spend the money on something on else?
 - c. For those participants who decided to take the luxury trip, how many **only** invited family members to accompany them?
 - d. For those who chose to spend the money on something else, how many decided to spend all of the money on themselves and/or their family members?
 - e. For those who decided to take the luxury trip, did anyone take any of the following individuals who is not a family member:
 1. A disabled person;
 2. A poor senior citizen;
 3. A child or other young person
 4. Someone confined to a wheelchair
 5. A person of another race or ethnic group?

7. Once the above questions are answered, allow 45 minutes for the participants to discuss the responses, as they relate to bringing the joy of the season to others showing forth the love and joy of Christ.

Notes

1. Franklin, Frazier E. The Negro Church in America. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1964. pp. 20-28.
2. "Only What You Do For Christ." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #548
3. Lincoln, Eric C. and Mamiya, Lawrence H. The Black Church in the American Experience. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990. p. 20.
4. Ibid., p. 20.
5. Ibid., p. 47.
6. Gates, Henry L. and McKay, Nellie Y. The Norton Anthology African American Literature. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997.
7. "Let's Just Praise the Lord." African American Heritage Hymnal. #208
8. "While We Are Waiting Come." African American Heritage Hymnal. #211