

2nd Opinion: Itâs looking a lot like ... Advent

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In early October when I made a quick stop in a local discount store, I couldn't help but notice the strange combination of products in the promotional section near the front of the store. Half of the aisle was fully stocked with Halloween items—bright plastic jack-o-lanterns, various costumes and assorted trick-or-treat candies. The other half of the aisle was being stocked with Christmas items, including miniature trees, boxes of lights, gift-wrapping paper and colorful candy canes. To see the decorations of two separate holidays together on the same aisle seemed a little out of place.

Now, the turkeys have been gobbled up, and the dressing has been devoured, and we are past Thanksgiving. Christmas music is playing on the radio, Christmas sale ads are blaring from flat-panel screens, and ornaments are hanging from the light poles on Main Street.

In our home and on our church campus, multiple trees are decorated, lights are twinkling and the aroma of scented candles fills the air. Just before our vespers service last Sunday evening, someone who was admiring the beauty of the décor said to me, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

"Not too fast," I said. "It's really beginning to look a lot like Advent." We need the season of Advent to prepare spiritually for Christmas.

At my home church, a rural congregation that helped shape my adolescent faith, we didn't observe [Advent](#). We proceeded directly from Thanksgiving to Christmas. In that tight-knit congregation, the sacred dates on our church calendar other than Christmas and Easter were church conference after worship service on the first Sunday of each month, gospel singing on

the fourth Sunday night, revival during the second full week in August, and homecoming the last Sunday in July. Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Passover and Pentecost were not in my ecclesial vocabulary.

Later, as a young pastor, I was introduced to the colors and candles of Advent, and my journey toward Christmas was upgraded and enriched. Today, I am convicted and convinced that as mission-driven Christians who live in a market-driven culture, we need the reflective disciplines of Advent to keep us alert to stealth forces like materialism, busyness, greed and indifference—those deceptive Grinches that would love to steal the real message and gifts of the season and replace them with superficial slogans and glamorous counterfeits.

I love a festive and joyful celebration of Christmas. However, to begin celebrating Christmas in October, November or even early December is like a parent trying to skip labor and delivery to go straight to the nursery. For a Christian, Advent is our progressive, devotional journey that culminates in grateful celebration when the Christ candle is lighted and the Christmas star shines over the manger in Bethlehem.

During Advent in our church, we prepare for Christmas by revisiting the prophets, singing the carols, re-reading the gospels and lighting the candles that re-energize our peace, hope, love and joy. Then we are better equipped to empathize with the anxiety of Mary and Joseph, to feel the labor pains of God, to celebrate the birth of the world's most pivotal newborn, and to recognize both the singing of angels and the sobs of Rachel weeping.

If we take the time to revisit the biblical stories, to reclaim the joyful promises and too rekindle the fires of our faith, we may find we are more than ready to follow Christ from the cradle to the cross and beyond.

The decorations are in place. The music has started. The Bible is open—and

so are my mind, my heart and my soul. It's looking a lot like Advent.

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