

2nd Opinion: Progressing toward Christmas

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When observed faithfully and progressively, Advent can prepare us for a Christmas celebration filled with mystical wonder and deep meaning—a spiritual communion that far exceeds the buzz of shallow commercialism.

In the rural church of my upbringing, we didn't observe Advent. We jumped directly from Thanksgiving to Christmas. In our close-knit congregation, the non-negotiable liturgical dates on our church calendar other than Christmas and Easter were church conference after worship service on the first Sunday, 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 nowhere to be found.

During my early years as a minister, I was introduced to the colors and candles of Advent, and my journey toward Christmas changed drastically. Today, I am convinced more than ever that as mission-driven Christians who live in a market-driven culture, we need the contemplative disciplines of Advent to keep us alert to deceptive forces like materialism, busyness and greed, which are illusive Grinches that would love to steal the core message of the season and replace it with superficial slogans and glittery counterfeits.

For Christians, Advent calls us to a progressive journey toward Christmas. When our days are seasoned with prayer and saturated in expectation, we tend to think about Christmas differently than does the rest of the world. Advent has a way of rescuing us from the relentless anxiety of trying to meet all of the cultural expectations of Christmas.

This year in our church, we are counting down the days until Christmas by

listening to the prophets, singing the carols, re-reading the Gospels, and lighting the candles that refuel our peace, hope, love and joy. Then we will be better prepared to sense the anxiety of Mary and Joseph, to feel the labor pains of God, to celebrate the birth of the world's most renowned newborn, and to hear both the singing of angels and the sound of Rachel weeping. This gradual journey called Advent culminates when the Christ candle is lighted and the Christmas star shines over the manger in Bethlehem.

If we dare to journey through this season one day at a time—reassessing the promises of the prophets and revisiting the nativity narrative of the gospels—we may discover we are better prepared to follow Christ from the cradle to the cross and beyond.

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