

# Guest Editorial: Advent: Taking the scenic route to Bethlehem

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Although plans were being developed for a new federal highway system as early as the 1930s, construction for the Interstate Highway System was finally authorized by the Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956. However, by the time I-20 opened between Atlanta and Birmingham in the 1970s, local residents in my hometown were looking forward to faster travel on the new freeway.

For years, my family had traveled to Birmingham from Anniston on old highway 78, a winding two-lane road that would take us across the Coosa River at Lake Logan Martin and over the mountains near Chula Vista. When I-20 finally opened, I was excited to accompany my grandparents on our annual Christmas trip to the Eastwood Mall in Birmingham to do a little Christmas shopping, to see “the real Santa,” to ride the escalator in Pizitz Department Store and to dine at Morrison’s Cafeteria.

I was surprised, however, to find that my grandfather preferred to drive the old two-lane highway rather than the new expressway. He would often say something like, “The freeway is for people who are in a rush. The scenic route is for people who want to enjoy the trip.”

I didn’t know anything about Advent back then, but now I understand that, in a sense, Advent invites us to take the scenic route to Bethlehem. There seems to be a subtle force in the ethos of our economy that pushes us to travel toward Christmas in the fast lane, implying that the season is all about shopping and spending, and acquiring and accumulating. John Jensen reminds us that, “The trouble with life in the fast lane is that you get to the other end in an awful hurry.” Advent encourages us to go slow and breathe

in the scenery en route to the manger.

As a young pastor, 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 reflective disciplines of Advent to keep us alert to stealth influences like materialism, busyness and greed, illusive forces that aim to cloak the real message of the season and replace it with superficial slogans and commercial clichés.

Advent is a time to listen for a truth that is bigger than words and to long for a gift that is other than stuff. By helping us reconnect with the heart of the Christmas story, Advent challenges us to reject cultural notions of a Jesus who promises prosperity, success and self-fulfillment, and calls us to follow the biblical Jesus who offers forgiveness, exemplifies simplicity and teaches self-denial.

For a Jesus follower or a spiritual inquirer, the season of Advent is like a scenic tour that begins with the promises of the prophets and concludes with the nativity narrative. Advent is a journey of emerging expectation that culminates when the Christ candle is lighted and the Christmas Star shines over the manger in Bethlehem.

Somehow when we revisit the prophets and we reread the gospels, we are better equipped to empathize with the anxiety of Mary and Joseph and to feel the labor pains of God. By observing Advent, when we celebrate the birth of the most renowned newborn in history, we can hear both the joyful sounds of angels singing and the repercussive sobs of Rachel weeping.

If we dare to avoid the expressway and we take the scenic route to Bethlehem, we might just hear a compelling still small voice calling us to follow Jesus from the cradle to the cross and beyond.

*This article originally appeared at the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).*

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