

The unsettled season of Advent

In incarnate Christ, God finds us and gives restless hearts rest



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O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 257).

Advent. We were just here it seems. It's a season of preparation and anticipation. It can become exhausting and relentless. The commercial run-up to Christmas has certainly gotten longer. Sometime

right after Labor Day the holiday displays appear in stores, ads pop up on our laptops and hand-held electronic devices, and carols creep into Muzak. And the annual holiday worship war between pastors and people will be waged over whether to sing Christmas carols in church during Advent. I will not weigh in on that epic debate in this column.

Instead, I want us to consider the deep and holy longing that is part of this season. It is significant that the words of the prophets and the yearning of Israel in exile are so prominent in the lessons appointed for Advent. The people longed for the Lord to come, to act, to redeem them, to take them home. Their exile in Babylon was no longer harsh. Many had made good lives, raised children and settled in. But it wasn't quite right. They were physically present in Babylon, but their hearts were not there.

I think Advent is that way for us. The earth is God's good creation. We find much joy in this life. As Lutherans we do not withdraw from the world but engage it, believing that it is a gift. But we also know that it is not quite right. That there is brokenness and pain—the pain we experience, the pain others cause, the pain we cause others. And, because of our brokenness, we turn in on ourselves trying, in futile self-sufficiency, to make ourselves whole.

In some ways Advent creates a certain restlessness. It may be one of the few seasons of the year when we become more aware of our longing for wholeness and more alert to the signs that something is approaching. It's like hearing a sound

in the distance that heralds something, but we just can't quite make it out. I believe Advent is a liminal time, a threshold. The Celts called this a "thin place," a place and time where heaven and earth seem to touch. It's just there, just out of sight, just out of reach. And we are filled with a holy longing. Isaiah said it: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ..." (Isaiah 64:1).

What is it about us that makes us care, that makes us restless? Isaiah also wrote: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isaiah 64:8). It seems that this Advent longing is an awareness that apart from God we are not whole. In Advent we find ourselves in the unsettled and restless time between the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new, a thin place where we draw near to God realizing, as Augustine wrote, "You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you" (Confessions).

But we can't get there by ourselves. This is not our work, but God's. Trustful waiting for the Lord is the purpose of Advent: waiting, yearning, expecting, believing.

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And God is faithful. We hear from the prophet Zephaniah that God promises: "At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you ..." (Zephaniah 3:20).

But the One for whom we wait is not content merely to draw us in, but fulfills this promise by coming to us as Emmanuel, God with us. In the incarnate Christ, God comes to us, finds us and gives our restless hearts rest.

A friend of mine said, "The world is longing for a deeper sense of spiritual connection, but we haven't figured out how to meet the world in that conversation and longing. How can Advent be the start of that new conversation? How different would Advent look if we could start to think of that deep longing as part of our Advent journey?"

Being unsettled in this season might be good for us. God will not disappoint. □

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel (ELW, 257).