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The War on Advent

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 2, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

This time of year, FOX News and other conservative critics begin bemoaning what they call ?The War on Christmas.? I will treat this strange phenomenon in my essay tomorrow morning. But, today I should like to raise a different alarm. Whatever one thinks about the ?War on Christmas,? there is most definitely a ?War on Advent.?

Calvinists are largely to blame for this phenomenon. (And much else!) The early Calvinists, aka Puritans, who settled what is now Massachusetts and who subsequently set the tone for much of American public Christianity, banned the celebration of Christmas. Too much joy I suppose. But, they tossed aside the venerable liturgical calendar which once imparted a sense of the sacred to the days of the year. Yes, Virginia, it?s true ? secularization started before Obama. With the liturgical calendar went not only Christmas but Advent.

I can think of few cultures that are in greater need of recovering Advent than our own. Advent is about expectancy, and our consumer culture only deals with a sense of expectancy when it can quickly, and relatively affordably, be converted into a purchase that satisfies the desire for the thing expected. Feeling blue? Come to our day spa. Not feeling as beautiful as the starlets on the screen? Get a gym membership. Hungry? Here is a happy meal, already made, just need to drop it in the microwave. Envious? Tune into ?Housewives of Wherever? to vicariously indulge the sensation. Delayed gratification is a thing our culture sometimes talks about. It is not something our culture practices.

And, in this instance, it is especially difficult to cultivate a sense of expectation because we know how the story ends. We know that Christmas comes after Advent and, beyond that, the Cross and the Grave and the Resurrection. It is hard to set that aside. How many books can one read a second time? Once you know the ending, the beginning lacks the dramatic impact it held at first reading.

Let us place ourselves back two thousand years, however. To appreciate Advent, we must place ourselves in the mind and heart of God?s Chosen People, Israel. Think of what they felt and desired. Generation after generation, for centuries, God?s People had not experienced what we experience when we come out of the confessional, the sense of reconciliation. Generation after generation, God?s People had not experienced the sense of communion with the Godhead that we receive at the Eucharist. They had not buried their dead as we bury our dead, in the sure hope in the resurrection. They were truly expectant, filled with hope and longing, yearning for a savior. We must do our best to think as they thought if we are to experience the surprise and the joy of Christmas.

Yet, perhaps our circumstance is not so different from those who waited so long ago. After all, while we have that wonderful sense of reconciliation after emerging from the confessional, we also know that it sometimes takes less than a day to warrant a return to the little box at the back of the Church. That sense of communion

with God and with each other that we experience in the Eucharist sometimes does not last past the coffee hour in the church hall when that person that really works your nerves refuses to let you alone. And, while our sure hope in the resurrection attends our funerals, I think sometimes that in the face of our littler, daily crosses, we easily give into despair and loneliness and forget God?s saving power. We, too, need a savior after all.

One of the ways the Church has taught us to cultivate a sense of expectancy is to focus on the Second Coming during Advent. Yesterday, we were told in the Gospels to be wakeful and, indeed, in our culture, there is so much that invites us to spiritual sleep. Many of the great Advent hymns look ahead to the Second Coming as well; Think of the words to ?Lo, He Comes on Clouds Descending? or ?The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns.? Of course, there is always the danger in any kind of spiritual preparation, that the focus becomes too much on us, and not enough on the Lord, what Pope Francis deemed in Evangelii Gaudium, a ?self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism.? This is especially the case in Advent when we are called to imagine a pre-Christian religiosity. If one of the surest means of preventing our cultivation of virtue from becoming a dalliance with pelagianism is to recognize that any virtue we can cultivate is only a response to God?s gift, it is hard to apply that lesson to Advent, which precedes the great gift of the Incarnation.

Another guaranteed method of deepening our spiritual receptiveness to God?s grace does commend itself especially to us at Advent: We should focus on our sins. One can read great Christian theologians to see how the coming of Christ created a perfectly reasonable, exceedingly beautiful economy of salvation. But, to confront the need for salvation we have only to look in the mirror. If we wish to imagine what it is like to live without a savior, we must look at those times in our lives when we behave as if the savior had not come.

God?s People Israel did not only expect a savior, they yearned for one. Desires, our deepest desires, for reconciliation, wholeness and holiness, for justice and peace, these desires run through the Scripture readings from Isaiah, Baruch, Zephaniah and Micah that the Church presents to us at Advent. My understanding of the significance of Christ differs from Isaiah?s hopes, but the yearning for a savior is the same, and it is rooted in the same appreciation for human folly and wickedness. Only when we are brutally honest about our sins, despite all of our efforts, only then can we truly say with conviction, Savior of the Nations, Come!

This is also, obviously, a decidedly Marian liturgical season. There is a beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother in the Chapel at the Dominican House of Studies. It stands on the ambo from which the psalms are led. It is the only statue I have ever seen of the Virgin pregnant. Pregnant with the Word of God. It is an Advent statue if ever there was one. Can we, in the circumstances of our lives, and in concert with the Blessed Mother, say to the angel, ?Let it be done to me according to thy word? or do we find reasons not to listen, reasons to act according to our wills and not to the Word of God? Who, better, than Mary, the Refuge of Sinners, to guide us at Advent. And for those who think of Mary as some docile instrument of patriarchy, re-read the Magnificat, on your knees. Be careful when you pray to Mary! She is not shy about proclaiming what the Kingdom means and it is discomfiting, still, to many. Certainly, here in 21st century America, the rich are not sent away empty!

There are prosaic things a household can do to cultivate the season of Advent in the heart. In my family, we may buy the Christmas tree a few days in advance, so the branches can drop, but we decorate it on Christmas Eve only. Advent wreathes and calendars are not very high tech in this high tech age, but so what. The symbolism of light is easy for a child to grasp and I hope the world of electronics has not meant that a small child cannot feel the fun I did when I opened the little windows on the Advent calendar. Prayers to the Blessed Mother, for whom that first Advent must have been astonishing, seem appropriate. Try not to get caught up in the hustle and rush, find time for quiet, not just for prayer, but for quiet. You don?t have to attend every holiday party, despite the free liquor. Find time to turn of the TV and listen to some beautiful music. Yes, the music, the glorious music of Advent. I have noted before that I think we Catholics do not sufficiently appreciate the catechetical value of hymnody. Parents, please teach your children to sing hymns! Pastors, encourage your congregations to sing. Advent has produced some of the most beautiful music in the Western canon.

In this spirit, starting today, I will post each day of Advent a beautiful Advent hymn for one of my morning postings. I apologize that not all the recordings are great, but I spent the long weekend searching for the best ones I could find. I hope they will help you and yours beat back the too-early onrush of Christmas, and invite you all to delve into the spirit of this season. A Happy Advent to you all.

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