

Want to Get Into the Christmas Spirit? Face the Darkness

How I fell in love with the season of Advent.

Nov. 30, 2019

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As darkness lengthens in late fall, we begin to see the signs of the season — advertisements with giant red bows atop new cars, Christmas music blasting everywhere, the heightened pace of holiday hustle and bustle, lights and garlands speckling every corner of the city.

But inside many church buildings, this time of year looks different. There, we find a countercultural sparseness. The altar is covered in purple, the color of both royalty and repentance. There's a slowing down, a silent stillness. The music turns to minor keys and becomes contemplative, even mournful. The Scripture readings are apocalyptic and trippy, strikingly short on sweet tales of babies, little lambs and Christmas stars. In this small space, Christmas season has not yet begun. The church waits in Advent.

In the church calendar, every period of celebration is preceded by a time of preparation. Historically, Advent, the liturgical season that begins four Sundays before Christmas Day, is a way to prepare our hearts (and minds and souls) for Christmas. For Christians, Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birth — that light has come into darkness and, as the Gospel of John says, "the darkness could not overcome it." But Advent bids us first to pause and to look, with complete honesty, at that darkness.

To practice Advent is to lean into an almost cosmic ache: our deep, wordless desire for things to be made right and the incompleteness we find in the meantime. We dwell in a world still racked with conflict, violence, suffering, darkness. Advent holds space for our grief, and it reminds us that all of us, in one way or another, are not only wounded by the evil in the world but are also wielders of it, contributing our own moments of unkindness or impatience or selfishness.

I'm well aware that for most Americans, Christmas has less to do with contemplating the incarnation of Jesus than celebrating friends, family, reindeer and Black Friday sales. Even among observant Christians, the holiday season has often been flattened into a sentimental call to warm religious feelings (if not a charged yet pointless argument over "Happy Holidays" versus "Merry Christmas"). Still, I think Advent offers wisdom to the wider world. It reminds us that joy is trivialized if we do not first intentionally acknowledge the pain and wreckage of the world.

G.K. Chesterton wrote that original sin is the "only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." The believer and atheist alike can agree that there is an undeniable brokenness to the world, a sickness that needs remedy. Whether we assign blame to human sinfulness, a political party, corporate greed, ignorance, tribalism or nationalism (or some of each), we can admit that things are not as they should be — or at least, not as we wish they were.

I did not grow up observing Advent or, for that matter, knowing what it was. Like many Americans, my family began celebrating Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. When I started attending an Anglican church in my late 20s, Advent drew me in. With its quiet beauty and doleful hymns, this season made intuitive emotional sense to me.

American culture insists that we run at breathless pace from sugar-laced celebration to celebration — three months of Christmas to the Super Bowl, Mardi Gras, Valentine's Day, Cinco de Mayo, Fourth of July, and on and on. We suffer from a collective consumerist mania that demands we remain optimistic, shiny, happy and having fun, fun, fun.

But life isn't a Disney Cruise. The tyranny of relentless mandatory celebration leaves us exhausted and often, ironically, feeling emptier. Many of us suffer from "holiday blues," and I wonder whether this phenomenon is made worse by the incessant demand for cheer — the collective lie that through enough work and positivity, we can perfect our lives and our world.

I do not want to be the Grinch tsk-tsking anyone for decorating the tree early or firing up "Jingle Bell Rock" before the 25th. I'm all for happiness, joy, eggnog, corny sweaters and parties, but to rush into Christmas without first taking time to collectively acknowledge the sorrow in the world and in our own lives seems like an inebriated and overstuffed practice of denial.

The church, after all, reserves 12 whole days for feasting and festivity during Christmas. Both darkness and light are real, and our calendar gives time to recall both. But in the end, Christians believe the light is more real and more enduring. There is still good news to celebrate, even when — perhaps especially when — it's been a hard year.

The arrival of Christmas Day is not the culmination of the holiday season, but merely the starting pistol for almost two weeks of good food and drink, parties and community gatherings, lights and gifts, service and time together. Times of worship become jubilant and joyful: White replaces purple, babies are finally placed in mangers, and Christmas carols fill the air.

My church community tries to keep the party going for 12 whole days, which can be a little hard when everyone else's tree is on the curb and school is starting up again, but we try nonetheless. Christians are called to take up celebration as intentionally as they take up waiting.

We need communal rhythms that make deliberate space for *both* grief and joy. For me, the old saying rings true: Hunger is the best condiment. Abstaining, for a moment, from the clamor of compulsive jollification, and instead leaning into the reality of human tragedy and of my own need and brokenness, allows my experience of glory at Christmastime to feel not only more emotionally sustainable but also more vivid, vital and cherished.

Our response to the wrongness of the world (and of ourselves) can often be an unhealthy escapism, and we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from pain as much as anything else. We need collective space, as a society, to grieve — to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.

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A version of this article appears in print on . Section SR, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: Before Christmas, Face the Darkness