

**“Blessed is He who Comes!”: History and Eschatology in the Episcopal Church’s Liturgical
Resources for Advent, 1928-2012**

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Abstract

The season of Advent has featured a complex mix of theological emphases since its beginnings: it looks back to Christ’s first coming and ahead to his second, while celebrating his comings in the present. In this paper I examine the theology of Advent as it is portrayed by the official liturgical resources of the Episcopal Church in the USA from 1928 to today, with particular attention to the interplay between historical remembrance and future expectation. I note that over the past century the predominance of themes of the first coming has increased while that of the second coming has decreased, and I consider the possible negative consequences of an Advent focused primarily on historical commemoration rather than eschatological hope. I propose that by making thoughtful choices using the resources available, congregations can celebrate Advent in a way that honors the entire spectrum of rich symbolic imagery and theological emphases of this most forward-looking season of the church’s liturgical year.

Introduction

The origins of Advent are notoriously difficult to trace. Martin Connell has pointed out that while the evidence for the beginnings of Easter and Christmas can at least be grouped by some sort of organizing principle—be it geography, chronology, or theological emphasis—no such principle

manifests itself for Advent.¹ It seems that from the beginning this season has been characterized by a combination of purposes and emphases. It is primarily a preparatory season for Christmas; yet there is also evidence for other motivations in some of its antecedents, from an ember-day fast carrying themes of eschatological expectation,² to a possible preparation for baptism at the feast of the Epiphany,³ to a Christian response to the pagan Saturnalia,⁴ to an eschatological *end* of a lectionary year which had begun at Christmas.⁵ The evidence is sketchy, but some or all of these motivations seem to have combined with a desire in the fourth and fifth centuries to spend time in preparation for the newly introduced nativity feast of December 25.⁶ Over time, in different ways throughout the West (and indeed in the East as well), this created a pre-Christmas season of three to six weeks.⁷ At Tours, for example, the pre-Christmas fast of the sixth century began with St. Martin's Day on November 11.⁸ The Roman church's Advent was shortened from six weeks to four in about 600 under Pope Gregory the Great.⁹

This all-too-brief summary of the possible origins of Advent suggests that, whatever other antecedents it may have had, the season as we know it is primarily one of preparation for Christmas. But preparing for Christmas can itself mean more than one thing. Connell has identified three intertwined theological traditions for Advent, none of which can be shown to precede the others and each of which appears in multiple geographical regions. These are the scriptural (or historical), which

¹ Martin J. Connell, "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 351.

² Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, Second emended ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 147–150; J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1993), 14–17.

³ Talley (151) and Alexander (9-12) follow Bernard Botte in finding this hypothesis unlikely. However, Connell considers the evidence and still sees it as a possibility: "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," 364, 369–370.

⁴ Talley, *Origins*, 150.

⁵ Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming*, 17–19.

⁶ The origins of Christmas itself, while intertwined with those of Advent, are too complex to deal with here. Susan Roll provides a nuanced overview of the state of the question, considering both the history-of-religions and computation hypotheses, in "The Origins of Christmas," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. John Francis Baldovin and Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 273–290.

⁷ See Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming*, 7–8, for similar themes in the Syrian church.

⁸ Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming*, 12.

⁹ Connell, "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," 368.

focuses on the narratives of the incarnation; the eschatological, which focuses on the culmination of history in Christ's return; and the ascetical, which focuses on preparation and penitence.¹⁰ For Connell this is related to the fact that Christmas can be understood either as a simple historical remembrance (as taught by Augustine of Hippo) or as a continuing mystery into which believers are incorporated with ongoing relevance to the present and future (as taught by Leo the Great).¹¹ Connell sees this difference as a key to evaluating present-day celebrations:

Is Christmas, reiterating Augustine's side of the argument, merely a remembrance of a birth that happened as a *fait accompli* in Bethlehem (according to scripture) two millennia ago? Or, with Leo's theology, is the body of Christ brought forth from Mary so united with the body of Christ gathered at the altar to celebrate the nativity that these are inseparable in the life and theology of the church?¹²

This essay takes up Connell's invitation to examine contemporary approaches to Advent with an eye toward their theological orientations. I do so within the faith community to which I belong and which I know best: the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Specifically, I examine the way Advent appears in the various official liturgical resources of the Episcopal Church between 1928 and today. I have chosen to take four more-or-less arbitrary historical "snapshots" by surveying the resources in use in 1935, 1955, 1985 and 2012; these four years allow me to cover all the major liturgical texts that have appeared since 1928. Connell's essay hints at a preference for Leo's approach over Augustine's. I share this preference, which I will explore in the light of recent discussions of anamnesis and historicism, and I will consider the extent to which each set of resources portrays Advent as a season of eschatological expectation rather than one of simple commemoration of the past.

While Connell's categories are helpful in showing just how complex the origins of Advent are, they have not proven adequate for my purposes because of the complicated ways in which symbolic language actually overlaps in liturgical texts. "Ascetical" language can be oriented toward

¹⁰ Connell, "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," 351.

¹¹ Connell, "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," 349–50.

¹² Connell, "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West," 370.

preparation for Christmas or preparation for Christ's return (or, of course, for both at the same time). Many texts which are clearly "eschatological"—such as, for example, the prophetic oracles of Isaiah—are general enough to be applied either to Christ's first coming or to his second. Other texts make explicit reference to one or the other coming, or to both, or indeed to Christ's coming in the present moment through sacrament, scripture, or the neighbor. In order to categorize these complex references a more detailed taxonomy drawn from Bernard of Clairvaux is helpful. In a much-loved Advent sermon, Bernard speaks of three comings of Christ: past (roughly corresponding to Connell's "historical"), present, and future (roughly corresponding to Connell's "eschatological").¹³ Thus for this study I have paid close attention to whether a text focuses unambiguously on past, present, or future comings of Jesus, or whether it uses language general enough to refer to more than one of these. I have also noted the extent to which language of judgment or comfort appears, and I have been attentive to frequently-occurring secondary motifs such as darkness and light, pregnancy and birth, and scripture.

The methodology of this project draws from several important sources. In that I study textual structural units with careful attention to the ways in which they change from one source to the next, I am deeply indebted to the method of comparative study made popular by Anton Baumstark which has remained central to the discipline of liturgical studies, particularly in recent decades through the work of Robert F. Taft.¹⁴ In that I attempt to make a close reading of the way words like "advent" or "coming" actually function within their grammatical and symbolic contexts in a given text, I have been influenced by Lawrence A. Hoffman and Gabriele Winkler.¹⁵ I have also been influenced by

¹³ Sermon 5.1, "On the Intermediate Coming and the Threefold Renewal," in John Leinenweber, ed., Irene Edmonds, Wendy Mary Beckett, and Conrad Greenia, trans., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons for Advent And the Christmas Season* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 33. This text is read in the Roman Office of Readings on Wednesday in the first week of Advent.

¹⁴ See Anton Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, ed. Bernard Botte, trans. F. L. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1958); Robert F. Taft, "Comparative Liturgy Fifty Years After Anton Baumstark (d 1948) : A Reply to Recent Critics," *Worship* 73, no. 6 (N 1999): 521–540.

¹⁵ "Traditional scholarship taught me to extract only content: in this case, every time a version of the root y.d.h ('to give thanks') is to be found. Yet, what proves probative is not just the liturgy's contents, but the form in which those

Margaret Mary Kelleher's work on how ritual "mediates something of an assembly's public world of meaning, its horizon" in that I attempt to describe the "public horizon" of meaning expressed in a given set of texts.¹⁶ However, Kelleher's work is not primarily concerned with texts but with the overall act of ritual performance. In this project I have mainly worked with texts, though I have given some attention to their musical settings. Finding ways in which the ritual performance of actual communities correlates with—or counters—the horizon of meaning implied by these textual resources is mostly beyond the scope of the present paper; I have not attempted to do more than offer a few observations and proposals based on personal experience. This would be a fruitful topic, though, for future ethnographic study.

The decades since 1928 have brought immense change to the Episcopal Church's liturgical life—including its celebration of Advent. Today's prayer book, lectionary, and hymnals offer a vastly broader array of textual and musical resources than at any time in the past, and I see this as a great gift. At the same time, I note a moderate but clearly discernible shift in emphasis away from future eschatology and toward a realized eschatology that focuses on the Bethlehem event, or on Christ's present-day coming into our hearts, as the "coming" of Jesus which the assembly is celebrating. I will suggest that this shift may carry unintended consequences for the richness of the church's worship and discipleship. While historical memory is an essential component of Christian faith, anamnesis goes beyond simple historical reenactment. Christian liturgical celebration is always an activity that takes place here and now, remembering what God has done in the past and being attentive to what God is doing and will do in the future. For Episcopalians to lose sight of the ways

contents are expressed." Lawrence Hoffman, "The Liturgical Concept of Thanksgiving: A Study in Liturgical Theology," in *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Essays In Honor Of Paul F. Bradshaw*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004), 193–194; For another example of this kind of close reading for the theological implications of the way a key term is used, see Gabriele Winkler, "The Sanctus: Some Observations with Regard to Its Origins and Theological Significance," in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church, Vol. 3: Liturgy and Life*, ed. Pauline Allen, Wendy Mayer, and Lawrence Cross (Everton Park, Queensland: Centre for Early Christian Studies, 2003), 111–131.

¹⁶ Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Hermeneutics in the Study of Liturgical Performance," *Worship* 67, no. 4 (July 1993): 317.

Advent calls the church to look toward the full consummation of Christ's victory would represent a serious diminution of this most thoroughly eschatological season. With this study I seek to trace the ways this shift has occurred, and to point to ways in which Episcopalians can practice an Advent that does justice to the historical and theological complexity of the season, waiting and working in the light of *all* the comings of Christ: past, present, and still to come.