

# *Making the Unseen Visible: Preparing for Advent Worship<sup>1</sup>*

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Every Sunday School child knows that the primary themes of Advent are waiting, expectation, and anticipation and that “prepare the way of the Lord” is its theme song. More recently our anticipation has been heightened by such songs as “The Cantic of Turning,” based on Mary’s song, the Magnificat. Who can fail to be inspired by singing that begins “My heart cries out with a joyful shout!” and repeats again and again, “The world is about to turn.” God “is turning the world around.” Words like waiting and anticipation seem too mild to describe our Advent expectations, and we find ourselves longing, yearning, hoping for Christ’s return and the resulting turning of the world.

In reality we live between two great “turnings,” a paradox that becomes quite clear during the season of Advent. Lawrence Stookey notes that we live between time and eternity. We remember how the world was “turned upside down” at Christ’s first coming, all the while keeping our eyes on the horizon for Christ’s coming again. We are constantly reaching back into the treasures of our history and heritage as God’s people, even while we strain forward in anticipation of God’s ultimate redemption of the cosmos. Stookey describes this as the “cruciform” life:

Christians are called to assume a cruciform posture. Standing upright with feet firmly planted in the present, we stretch out one arm to grasp our heritage and the other arm to lay hold of our hopes; standing thus, we assume the shape of our central symbol of faith: the cross. If either hand releases its grip, spiritual disaster threatens as the sign of the cross becomes misformed.<sup>2</sup>

The first “turning” is the story of old, how God sought fervently to renew creation’s intention and in the fullness of time sent the divine Son, a babe in a manger, to be the savior of the world. The second “turning,” the one we await with such deep anticipation and longing, is the return of Christ when the redemption won by his dying and rising will be completed and fulfilled. For these reasons, and many more, preparation for Advent worship brings with it both an urgency and a profound reconsideration of its meaning. We are moving from darkness into light. During Advent we remember, anticipate, and embody God’s turning the world around.

When we think of preparing for Advent worship, we naturally think of its words and music. Perhaps that is why there is an abundant array of exegetical and musical helps for planning. We must not forget, however, that all of liturgy includes the additional “languages” of worship: space, the arts, liturgical gesture and action, and the liturgical calendar itself. With Advent worship in mind, this article will give emphasis to the languages of the arts and liturgical action, relying on other sources to support Advent’s literary and musical languages.

We are embodied creatures and cannot exist otherwise. The world comes to us

as touch and sound and smell, through skin and ear and eye. We depend on persons and objects and images that have form and substance in order to understand realities that transcend the material world. For Christians this makes perfect sense since all of the Christian life is incarnational. Christian knowing depends on the gesture of welcome, the touch of kindness, the spoken word of forgiveness, the strong voice of proclamation, the embodied acts of bathing and eating and drinking, the pulpit, font and table, and much more. Thus the languages of the visual arts and liturgical action are essential to the proclamation of the Incarnation. Like the Incarnation itself, they make the unseen visible.

Worship, as the central act of the Christian life, is largely a non-verbal activity. As such it is a delicate balance between verbal and visual and aural, between architecture and the arts and the calendar. The words of worship -- its biblical stories, practiced dialogs, engaging hymn texts, and hearty proclamations -- provide the context and reference points for the expansive possibilities of worship's additional languages. These multiple languages of worship contribute most robustly to our communal spiritual formation when they work together, each language embellishing and extending the others.

### *The Arts and Advent Worship*

For several centuries Protestant churches were austere, minimally decorated places with a seeming aversion to use of the arts. All that has changed. Today many congregations are employing the visual arts to enhance the environment for worship and proclaim the gospel. These include furnishings, paintings, sculpture, stained glass, vestments, communion ware, candlesticks and candles, processional crosses and torches, flower arrangements, paraments and banners, offering plates and baskets, and much more. This deeper appreciation for the arts in worship is a welcome inclusion in worship planning. At the same time, care must be taken to insure the appropriateness of any of these artistic expressions in worship, given that the qualities of our surroundings influence our way of seeing God, the world, and ourselves. Careless or haphazard inclusion of the arts in worship can result in a *deformative* environment rather than one in which the spiritual formation of the congregation is deepened.

The act of giving careful attention to an object, particularly an object of beauty, produces in us a response, a reaction. The reaction may be positive or negative, evoking rejection, attraction, excitement, disappointment, or grief. The change may be slight or profound. But whatever the response, we are changed by the encounter. It is not the onetime act of attention, however, that is ultimately transformative (although there are occasions when this is the case). Rather, it is sustained attention over time on which Christian spiritual formation depends. In recent years there has been a renewed emphasis on Christian practices and the need for repeated engagement in them. Similarly, our engagement with the beauty of worship and its environment can be seen as an element of Christian practice. It is in seeing again and again those material objects that make visible the unseen presence of God that Christian spiritual formation can take place.<sup>3</sup>

Welcoming the arts in worship, especially during the church's liturgical seasons, is for the purpose of this kind of spiritual formation. With these spiritually formative qualities in mind, it is essential that all artwork and liturgical objects be of the highest artistic and material quality that a congregation can provide. An environment

for worship that shows carelessness or haphazard attention to the intrinsic artistic qualities of the space and the objects it contains does not bring honor to God, clearly proclaim the gospel, or support faithful spiritual formation. Artists, designers, and skilled crafts persons who are accustomed to giving attention to color, materials, design, scale, and the overall compatibility of all the artistic elements of a worship space can be of central importance as congregations seek to enhance the languages of the arts in their worship space.

During Advent there is welcome attention to color, as we move from the green of Ordinary Time to the blue or purple of Advent. Artists can make much of this color change with the inclusion of paraments, table covers, and banners that use a variety of hues and textures. As the season moves from darkness to light, from longing to eager anticipation, the shades can be shifted to include more and more “light.” At Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, the worship space is expansive, so there is room for several evergreen trees in the chancel area.<sup>4</sup> On the first Sunday of Advent, the trees are bare, but throughout the season more and more lights are added until, on Christmas, the trees are ablaze with light.

Many congregations have collections of “Chrismons” or monograms for Christ with which they decorate a Chrismon tree. These are made in materials of gold and white and include the “Chi Rho” made of Greek letters, the “IHS” abbreviation of Christ in Greek letters, the Alpha and Omega, and perhaps other symbols for Christ. Congregations may also have sets of symbols that commemorate Jesus’ ancestry and are used to decorate a Jesse Tree. These symbols call attention to the ultimate nature of Christ and his work and help the community recall the broader meanings of Advent. They help draw attention to our life “between the turnings” rather than allow us to focus exclusively on Bethlehem. Some intentional teaching and interpretation as to the meaning of the Chrismons and the Jesse Tree would be appropriate.

In recent decades the use of the Advent wreath or Advent candles has become a staple of seasonal worship. The progressive candle lighting signals movement, Sunday by Sunday, toward that enlightenment for which the Christian community longs. Christ is on the way, nearer with every Lord’s day. The light increases and our joyous yearning with it. Often three of the candles are purple and the candle for the third Sunday of Advent is rose colored. These colors correspond with the lectionary readings for the season, where, on the first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent, the community is called to watch and wait. But on the third Sunday of Advent, based on Philippians 4, the community is called to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” The rose colored candle signals this “rejoicing.” The Latin word for rejoice is *gaudete*. Thus the third Sunday of Advent is known as “Gaudete Sunday.” If the Advent wreath is adorned with evergreens, use fresh greens. If they dry out, replace them.

Many congregations routinely use electronic media and projection screens during worship. In Advent the possibilities for their use are especially inviting because of the variety of images that might be employed. This includes works of the classical and contemporary visual arts that depict characters in the scripture readings assigned for Advent. Thematic images and designs that week-by-week emit more light can also be included. These images can mark the season while also drawing worshipers into its movements, reminding the waiting congregation that Christ is coming.

### *Enacting and Embodying Advent*

According to Ronald Byars, there is “a profound and mysterious reciprocity between body and spirit.”<sup>5</sup> The use of the body, which includes our spoken words, but goes far beyond them, provides humankind with a rich gestural vocabulary. In worship this vocabulary of movements and gestures enlarges our capacity for praise, thanksgiving, lament, confession, and commitment.

The actions and gestures of worship -- signs of welcome, prayer postures, signs of blessing, the kiss of peace, the preparation of worship space, and liturgical processions -- make up the vocabulary of the church. As such they are both functional and symbolic. They include simple things such as movement from one part of the worship space to another and also the profoundly symbolic communication of praise to the Creator of heaven and earth as well as the symbolic embodiment of God’s generous welcome and forgiveness. Christians bathe one another in the name of the Trinity; they eat and drink together. They kneel, bow, raise hands in prayer, greet one another with Christ’s peace, lay on hands with prayer, and much more. These actions and gestures are the “body language” of the church. Liturgical actions and gestures communicate and make present the reality of God’s self-giving. When our bodies, through action and gesture, are engaged in worship, we learn over time that the Christian life is about doing and being (as well as thinking and knowing). Thus gestures and actions become “sign acts” that convey what cannot be conveyed in words alone. Word and gesture together “combine saying and doing into potent signs of grace.”<sup>6</sup> In the process we are drawn into the divine life of the Trinity. Daniel Benedict describes spiritual engagement in the liturgy as “Love’s dance” that includes God, ourselves, and the whole of creation. “When we participate in the liturgy, we are caught up in mystery--the mystery of God’s loving the world and the Paschal mystery as Love’s dance--and . . . our lives are entwined with the life of the triune God.”<sup>7</sup> We are changed. We are redeemed, reconciled, strengthened in faith, and commissioned. Through the mysterious reciprocity of body and spirit, the whole community is spiritually formed for the fullness of praise of God and for the mission of the church in the world. Such spiritual and liturgical embodiment is especially appropriate for the season of Advent, when we celebrate the embodiment of the Holy One of God.

We have already mentioned the Advent wreath as a liturgical object. Now we turn to the liturgical actions of lighting the Advent wreath. It has been common practice to invite several members of a congregation to read scripture, lead prayers, light the Advent candles, and lead congregational responses at the beginning of each Advent service. On these occasions it is essential that these worship leaders be well prepared to lead the congregation with grace and poise. Unprepared or poorly prepared worship leaders become more of a distraction and hindrance than an asset to the worship of the community. Texts that accompany the lighting of the Advent candles should highlight the increasing light of the season and the profound anticipation of the church for Christ’s coming.

Many congregations have been attentive to the hectic demands of the “Christmas season” and have introduced periods of silence during Advent worship as an act of countercultural faith. Rather than lots of words, congregations might choose to dim the lights, light the Advent candles in silence, and let the congregation meditate on the coming of the light. The simple, graceful, unhurried gesture of candle lighting communicates powerfully. A simple song such as “Wait for the Lord” might signal

the conclusion of the meditation.

If the congregation does not already celebrate the Eucharist every Lord's Day, the season of Advent is an especially appropriate time to introduce weekly communion. The actions of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, an eyes-open prayer, take on particular meaning during Advent. The familiar dialog begins with "The Lord be with you," "and also with you." Then, when the one presiding calls out, "Lift up your hearts!" while lifting her hands, the congregation can truly respond, "We lift them up to the Lord." (Or, as the ancients used to say, "They are with the Lord!") When we take bread, bless and break it, and give it to one another, the long awaited presence of our risen Lord is made real. When people come forward to receive bread and wine, to dine at the Lord's Table, their bodies and their spirits are fed with the living bread. Getting out of one's chair and moving toward Christ made known in bread and wine can be lastingly spiritually formative. Watching others as they are offered "the body of Christ; the cup of salvation" and hearing them respond with a hearty "Amen" is a feast for the eyes and ears and soul.

Many people dread "the holidays." Their sadness, grief, and regret brought on by death, divorce, family dysfunction, or other life circumstance are often intensified as they watch the cultural party atmosphere all around. The inclusion of prayers for healing and wholeness, accompanied by the touch of a loving hand, should be part of the church's ministry at all times, but especially during Advent. If the congregation comes forward for communion, it is relatively simple to add a "station" for such prayers. Pastors and other appropriate congregational leaders can welcome worshipers into a quiet corner for prayer with the laying on of hands. Be well prepared for long lines awaiting prayer! It never fails to surprise those who introduce this rite for the first time how many in their congregation are eager for such intimate care.

For the past thousand years, an Advent litany called the "O Antiphons" has been used in worship. It consists of a series of seven call and response prayers. Each prayer begins with an address to God followed by a description of what God has done and closes with a petition for God to come again in power. The richness of the biblical story is on full display here, using many names for God, including "O Wisdom; O Adonai; O Root of Jesse; O Key of David; O Radiant Dawn; O Ruler of the nations; O Immanuel." Each antiphon is followed by a congregational plea to "Come, Lord Jesus."<sup>8</sup>

There are several traditional ways to include the "O Antiphons" in Advent worship, but I want to suggest that as an embodied expression of prayer, they be used in procession. Worship leaders including crucifer, acolytes, torch bearers, banner bearers, pastors, choir, and others might form a procession and come into the midst of the people. There they would pause and pray the first antiphon. The procession would then continue through all parts of the worship space, in and out and up and down the side aisles and central aisles, pausing at appropriate intervals to pray each of the antiphons. A brief sung response -- perhaps "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" since it is based on the O Antiphons -- might be included between prayers as the procession moves. The procession should end in a way that would place worship leaders in their accustomed places.

### *Planning Together for Advent*

Every artistic or embodied liturgical practice requires careful forethought and

planning. Planning processes are often strictly individual, with pastor and musician and “altar guild” each doing their part with the hope that everything will come out right on Sunday. There are several reasons why, especially during Advent, a collaborative process should be put in place and that a broad group of artists, designers, musicians, educators, and leaders should be included in planning and preparing for Advent worship. First, worship that expresses our deepest hopes, expectations, and longings requires nothing less. Both for ourselves and for those Christmas and Easter worshipers, we want the gospel fully and winsomely proclaimed in song, story, environment, and action. Worshipers should know the coming of Christ in all they see, hear, do, and feel.

Second, the process of planning and preparing for Advent worship is, in and of itself, spiritually formative. Everything the church does teaches. We learn the Christian life through participation in congregational life, and this is especially true during the seasons of the church year. When one is invited to be part of a worship planning team, one is called on to examine, analyze, and imagine worship practices in order to assess their appropriate “fit” for the congregation. Congregational leaders have an unsurpassed opportunity to engage in robust spiritually formative conversations as they work with artists, singers, instrumentalists, and other worship leaders to prepare Advent worship that brings glory to God. This process has been called “caring for God’s people at prayer.” All worshipers are cared for by careful planning and preparation, and in the process, those who do the planning and preparation are deeply spiritually formed.

What is included in planning and preparing for Advent worship? Most importantly, prayer. Prayer should surround all that goes into planning and preparing for Advent worship. This begins with prayerfully brainstorming the names of persons for the Advent planning team and continues throughout the planning process, Advent worship itself, and prayerful evaluation afterward.

Advent planning groups engage in a three part process of *describing*, *analyzing*, and *imagining* various aspects of Advent worship in order to assess their proper place in the congregation’s practices. The *descriptive* phase draws on past practices of the congregation, ideas from other congregations, and from a variety of print and online resources. These descriptions should be as detailed as possible in order to create a clear picture of what a particular practice might include. Then the practice should be *analyzed* in order to explore the ways it might (or might not) bring glory to God and care for God’s people at prayer. What are the theological assumptions imbedded in the practice? Are those assumptions consistent with what we want to proclaim? How will this practice harmonize with the other languages of worship or with the other practices of Advent? As these ideas are explored and analyzed, Advent’s central themes of hope, longing, and the coming of the Light will serve as a guide so that the proclamation of Advent is clear. Finally, the Advent planning group can *imagine* what Advent worship might include “this year in *our* church.” All of the logistical and practical aspects of each Advent practice will come into view here. Who will do what when? What artists, musicians, designers, and crafts people are needed? How will they be prepared, rehearsed, encouraged, supported? The best a congregation has to offer should be a central criterion here, insuring that there is excellence in materials, design, and artistic execution. Big budgets are not necessary. What is necessary is a commitment to worship that glorifies God and proclaims God’s greatness and

compassion to all.

Perhaps the best Advent planning advice I've seen is in a brief article by Joy Engelsman titled "On the Twelfth Year of Planning."<sup>9</sup> This experienced educator and worship planner uses the tune of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to give some excellent advice in a whimsical way. If you were to sing it, it would go something like this: "From the first year of planning the lesson that I learned was don't try to do it alone." Here's Joy's complete list:

1. Don't try to do it alone.
2. Honor tradition.
3. Try something new.
4. Pray without ceasing.
5. Start in May.
6. Be flexible.
7. Learn how to brainstorm.
8. File good ideas.
9. Communicate completely.
10. Spend time with children.
11. Visit other churches.
12. Accept an invitation (relinquish control and accept the hospitality of others).

I like it that "Start in May" is verse five (think "Five golden rings!"). The song gives appropriate emphasis to the "plan ahead" factor in all liturgical planning.

Advent worship planning presents pastors and worship leaders with an unparalleled opportunity for communal spiritual formation, as a group of inspired artists, musicians, lovers of scripture, and faithful worshipers gather to "make the unseen visible" and to consider Christ's coming to "turn the world around." What greater gift could we give to one another and the congregation than to invite everyone to give full-hearted, embodied, and engaged praise to God for God's own self-giving? May it be so in congregations far and wide.

#### Notes

1 Portions of this article are adapted from Jane Rogers Vann, *Worship Matters: A Study for Congregations* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

2 Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time in the Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 22.

3 Vann, 51.

4 Vann, photos on pages 53 and 54.

5 Ronald P. Byars, "Body Language," *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts* 35 (2001) 4-5.

6 Don E. Saliers, "The Power of Sign-Acts," in Anderson, *Worship Matters: A United Methodist Guide to Worship Work*, ed. E. Byron Anderson (Nashville: Discipleship resources, 1999), 1:175.

7 Daniel T. Benedict, *Patterned by Grace: How Liturgy Shapes Us* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007), 124.

8 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 166-167.

9 Joy Engelsman, "On the Twelfth Year of Planning," *Reformed Worship* 85 (September 2007):<http://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2007/twelfth-year-planning>.