

Introduction

What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know
what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who
asks me, I do not know.

—Augustine, *Confessions*

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there?

—Negro spiritual

At my first Easter Vigil, a single word set my mind racing. The darkened sky, a moody blue-black mixture with the Shenandoah Mountains in the background, seemed a perfect setting for a weighty theological phrase to strike. But as the story of redemption was read aloud from the Old Testament Scripture, all throughout the outdoor service my mind fixated on one simple word: *this*.

The liturgy for Easter Vigil, the long meditative service on Saturday evening before Easter Sunday, begins with these words: “On this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life . . .”¹ As I stood at the communion table, experiencing the near culmination of my first immersion into the fullness of Holy Week, I was struck by the

choice of *this* over *that*. I had known my pastoral transition from a nondenominational megachurch to a liturgical tradition would require some shifts. (That's why I desired to make the change.) But one month into my new ecclesial home, was I really ready for this sort of disorientation? Was I prepared to trade "*that* most holy night"—how I would have phrased it—for "*this* most holy night"? I had not misheard the liturgy, nor had I been authorized to approve the supremacy of *that* over *this*. The purposeful use of *this* represented a different orientation to worship, to Christ, and subsequently to time itself.

Days before, on Maundy Thursday, I had heard these words as the service, which centers on Jesus's Last Supper according to John's gospel, began:

This is the night that Christ the Son of Man gathered with his disciples in the upper room.

This is the night that Christ our Lord and Master took a towel and washed the disciples' feet, calling us to love one another as he has loved us.

This is the night that Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may here proclaim his perfect sacrifice.

This is the night that Christ the Lamb of God gave himself into the hands of those who would slay him.²

The language of *this* reminded me I was truly, terrifyingly, and gloriously caught up in this story of Jesus—foot washing, betrayal, false accusations, crucifixion, despair, and ultimately the undoing of death. This realization came not primarily through the power of the preached word but through, in part,

the temporal emphasis of that single word: *this*.

This suggests that time is something in which we participate. That some things are so real, so present, so deep, they don't just pass like the breeze. Some parts of time summon us to partake of them, and like a holy echo, they reverberate through the ages with sacred ramifications that grip the present. The notion of "*that* time" (as in "on that most holy of nights") suggests that time is strictly linear, detached. It's a thing that goes by and is done and gone. "*This* time" suggests the opposite—that certain events defy our common grasp of time. Embedded in each phrase is a different sense of time, one common and memorial and one holy and participatory.

Time in the Hands of a Gracious God

What is time? If the question left a true luminary like Saint Augustine confounded, it's no surprise that whatever answer just popped into your mind feels like grasping at straws. In our confusion we often disregard the question entirely. Who has time for such philosophical musings? Or in the words of a wonderful meme, ain't nobody got time for that.

Whether or not we take up the inquiry, each of us lives by some notion of time. All around us are competing ideas on what time is, what it's for, and why it matters. The pseudo-maxims are well known. According to some, time is money. It's the one resource billionaires can't buy even if they can fund treks to outer space. According to others, time is short. It is defined by its scarcity—it's the one resource perpetually slipping through our clenched hands. Even as you read this, you are "losing" time.

Time is by God and for God. But for what reason? In part, time is formative. Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom." Sounds a bit like

the whole “time is short” ethos, doesn’t it? Yet there’s more. If time is God’s, then it serves a greater purpose than being an ever-constant reminder of death. After all, death comes from sin and is, according to the apostle Paul, our great enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). There must be more to time in God’s mind than to remind his creatures that our funerals are right around the corner.

Time is a creative tool in the hands of a gracious God. From the very beginning, God has revealed himself as “merciful and gracious” (Exodus 34:6), and the fullness of his revelation in Jesus authenticates that he is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). It is no shock, then, that our gracious God uses time to draw us deeper into life with him. Among its many features, time is a gift, a means of drawing us nearer to our deepest purpose: knowing and enjoying God in exultant fullness.

Christians across the centuries have experienced time as a spiritually formative gift through the church year, or the church calendar. The church year is a gift, not a restraint. If “how we spend our days is . . . how we spend our lives,” as Annie Dillard writes,³ then the church year offers us the sacred task of spending our living in Jesus Christ. As we keep sacred time—spending our days, personally and corporately, rooted in the cycle of his life—the church year guides us to tangibly experience our spiritual unity with Jesus in our minutes, hours, days, and years.

Robert Webber described this dynamic of the church year through the concepts of objective and subjective spirituality. Webber defined objective spirituality as “a *given* spirituality.” It is the gift of salvation in Christ that none of us can secure or merit (Ephesians 2:8–9). But subjective spirituality is participatory; it “arises out of our response to God’s grace.”⁴ Whether we define and distinguish these two realities as justification

and sanctification or as union and communion, what matters most is the recognition that there are both an *objective* basis and *experiential* reality to our faith. And it is in the church year that we find a structure that deepens and intensifies our subjective experience of living with, in, and for Christ. In the church year, God gifts us a subjective way of going deeper in the objective truth of our salvation—Christ himself. Time is a formational tool in the hands of a gracious God.

The Church Year: Living into Higher Time

What does this have to do with the church year? Quite a lot. The church year is a call to live out the higher time of the kingdom in our so-called ordinary lives. Think of the church year as a metaphorical U-turn, a return to the recognition that time possesses a higher purpose than pushing us toward productivity or simply reminding us of our finitude. Time is a means of drawing close to Christ, eternal life, and the way of the kingdom. More specifically, the church year draws us in as participants in the life of Jesus, the world's one true Lord. The church year, then, is a journey further up and into the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). It's one more step, one more cycle into the hope of glory, which is Christ in us (Colossians 1:27).

By contrast, think about the nature and purpose of the civic year. The civic year possesses its own formative goal: Its aim is to mold us into its definition of conscientious consumer citizens who march along to the drumbeat of society. The cadence of the American civic year is alluring. We know its rhythms by heart: Make goals and resolutions at New Year's, get hyped for a new round of ads on Super Bowl Sunday, buy Hallmark cards at Valentine's, ache for the leisure of summer vacation by late April, grow melancholy as fall returns and

normal rhythms of the ordinary accompany the turning of the leaves, try not to overspend on Black Friday, and wage war against the onslaught of our basest consumer impulses come December. Then we rest for a few weeks. And we do it all over again.

There are few things blatantly evil about the civic calendar. In fact, what makes it such a dangerous frame for living is the absence of anything overtly sinister. Its discipleship by time silently conforms us not to the life of the kingdom but to the life of the state—a life of banality and consumption, a life untethered from Christ’s holy truths and counterintuitive rhythms.

The civic year offers us a life lived in lower time, ordered toward blind notions of progress, an inhumane ethos of productivity, and an addictive lust for autonomy, pleasure, and products. At a certain point, all of us must ask whose time we wish to live by—Caesar’s or Christ’s. We render our taxes to Caesar, but let us render ourselves to Christ by living into the church’s time.

The Church Year: Formation for Spiritual Zeros Who’ve Tried Everything Else

One aspect that drew me to a liturgical tradition was the formative power of the church year for people like me—easily distracted and undisciplined types. In *A Praying Life*, Paul Miller remarks that a life of prayer is less about self-discipline and more about neediness.⁵

His point is that if you want to pray more, get in touch with your needs, and the prayers will flow in either words or groans. It’s not the spiritual elite so much as the spiritually needy who pray without ceasing. I feel similarly about the

church year. It's not the elite who keep sacred time; it's the spiritual zeros.

I was drawn to the church year for its beauty, yes, but also for its gracious structure. It mitigated my devotional weakness by supplying clear tracks on which my life and heart could run, even if slowly and clumsily, toward Christ in every season. In the church year, it felt as though I received an heirloom, a long-lost family gift that enabled me to walk in the deep desire of my heart. One can live a holy life by the civic year, but I've found the effort required is herculean. If you find yourself yearning to walk more closely with Jesus but wavering in commitment and vigor, the church year can be a gracious guide into a vibrant spirituality. It is not for the strong and trendy but for the hungry and needy. In the church year, God employs time as our teacher, forming us in the curriculum of Christ's very life. Time becomes a deep immersion into the life of Jesus.

The Cycles of the Church Year: Experiencing the Saving Life of Christ

The church year invites us to experience the saving life of Christ in three cycles or movements:⁶

1. **The Cycle of Light:** Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany
2. **The Cycle of Life:** Lent, Holy Week, Eastertide, Pentecost
3. **The Cycle of Love:** Ordinary Time

The Cycle of Light is God *with* us in the Incarnation, the Cycle of Life demonstrates God *for* us in the gift of salvation, and the Cycle of Love is God working *through* us in love, service, and mission. In a sense, Ordinary Time is less extraordi-

nary in contrast to the Cycle of Light and the Cycle of Life, as evidenced by its fewer special days like Christmas or Palm Sunday. A fuller perspective, however, recognizes that Ordinary Time is the season in which all the cycles that have gone before form our daily lives.⁷

Entering the Cycle: How to Use This Book

Because this book introduces you to the church year, at some level to use this book is to follow the church year. I suggest entering each season by reading the introductory orientation that prefaces it. From there, I suggest partaking of the Scripture readings and devotions for each season.⁸ Try praying the collect prayer (the themed prayer) over multiple days. This slower, prayerful pace will help the themes of each season sink and settle into your soul. Approaching this differently than a daily devotional encourages you to engage the scriptures, prayers, and sermons slowly and reflectively—and communally. Consider reading on your own and then connecting with a group to discuss both the Scripture passages and devotional readings. Note that depending on the date of Easter, there will be more or fewer weeks for some seasons in this book. Advent, which is the beginning of the church year, always starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. From there, you can find the length of particular seasons with a Google search or at claudeatcho.com.

That said, you've bought this book, so you own it; it doesn't own you. Use it in whatever way is most life-giving and edifying for you. Here are some possible approaches:

- **Daily devotional approach.** If you're the type who yearns for a daily devotional, read one of the Scripture passages each day. Once you've read through all the passages, read the devo-

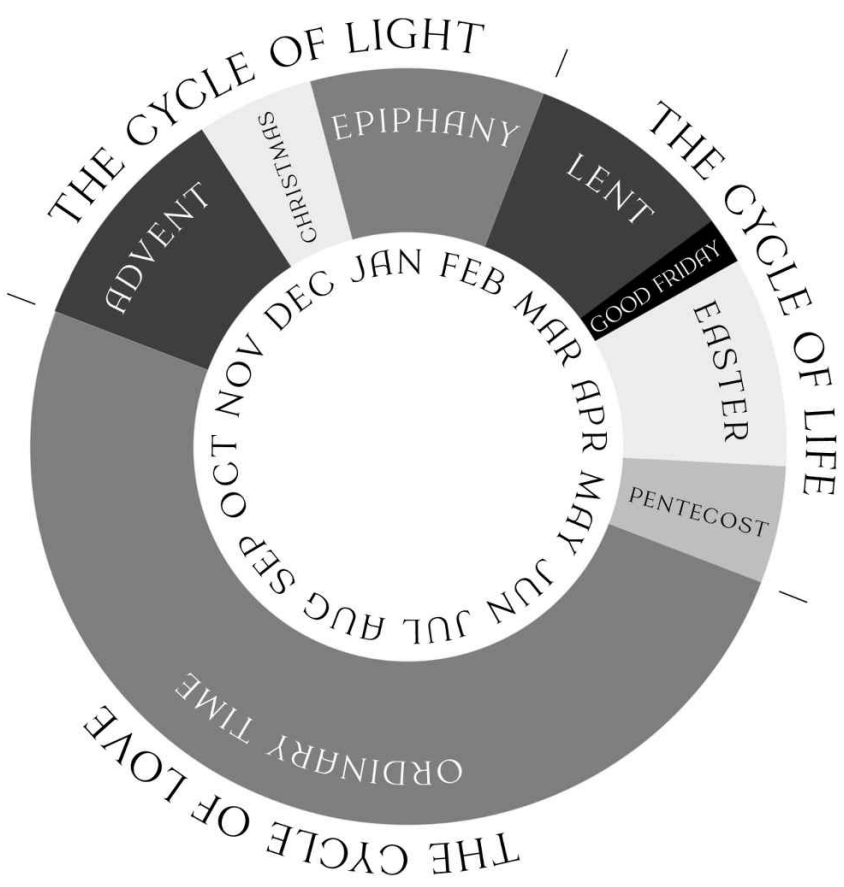
tional that draws from them. This approach gives you a chance to mediate on the Scripture readings and the devotional reflection over the course of five days, with two makeup days in case you get behind.

- **Weekly approach.** Say you already have a regular daily devotional practice. Use this book weekly to go deeper into each season of the church year. In one sitting, read the Scripture passages, pray the collect prayer, and read the devotional. This method works well as part of a Sunday or Sabbath routine, a tool for family devotions, or a way for preacher folks to get filled up after Sunday. An alternative approach could entail slowly reading the Scripture texts and prayer one day, engaging with the devotional sections on another, and concluding with a day of reflection on the discussion questions.

- **Communal approach.** As alluded to above, this book works well for group study and reading. Gather a group of friends for a season to read and discuss together the texts and the devotional. Keeping time with others represents the communal nature of our faith.

Whatever strategy you take, be assured that the Word will do its work.

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.⁹



ADVENT

The Lord Who Arrives Thrice

Advent is the time when God breaks in on us with new surprises and touches us with a renewing and restoring power.

—ROBERT WEBBER, *Ancient-Future Time*

Before we begin our Advent devotions, I want to provide some insight into this season and what it means. Few things frustrate and challenge us quite like waiting. Yet waiting is the first note of the church calendar. The church year begins with Advent, which means it begins with waiting—or better yet, anticipation. Anticipation is waiting flavored by hope, and this is at the center of Advent.

In Advent, we gaze backward to the Incarnation, Christ's first coming at his birth in Bethlehem. At the same time, we gaze forward to Christ's second coming, when he will judge, save, and usher in God's new creation in full. Just as the Israelites longed for a savior before the birth of Christ, we wait with the church across the ages for the second coming of our King.

At times, Advent has suffered from a slight case of mistaken identity. Advent is not Christmas extended. They are sibling seasons, but Advent has its own distinct personality. The preparation of Advent launches us into the celebration of

Christmas.

Advent Spirituality: How Advent Shapes Us

How does Advent shape our discipleship to Jesus? Advent summons us to align and ready our lives and hearts for the arrival of our Lord. At a basic level, the logic is intuitive. When guests plan to come for an extended stay in your home, you no doubt take essential and sometimes rather elaborate measures to prepare. Often, the anticipated arrival of a guest will produce in us fresh waves of motivation. Knowing they are coming may energize us to fix what we might otherwise leave broken, like a janky kitchen drawer, or to straighten up rooms we would have lazily left cluttered. The guest's anticipated presence ends up elevating the state of the whole house. Jesus spoke about his arrival in similar terms, comparing his second coming to the return of the master of the house at a time unknown:

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake. (Mark 13:35–37)

Advent spirituality is about the holy work of anticipation: watching, waiting, and staying awake.

Wherever we have been sluggish in our faith, apathetic toward Christ's return, and bored with seeking Christ's kingdom, Advent is a gracious wake-up call. In this season, the Lord wakes us from our slumber, calls us to stay alert, and beckons us to live under the truth that will soon transform

every square inch of reality: the fullness of the kingdom at the return of Jesus.

The “Three Advents” of Christ

- Christ’s coming at Bethlehem to be our savior
- The longing for Christ to come anew into our lives and hearts
- The expectation of Christ’s second coming at the end of history to rescue, judge, and establish his rule

When Christians speak of Christ’s coming, we speak of a truth that bends time. The advent of our Lord is a past, present, and future gift and reality. In this way, Advent centers on the Lord who arrives thrice. In the Incarnation, we marvel at the Lord’s first advent among us as the Word became flesh (John 1:14). We anticipate the Lord’s second advent in his future return at the end of history (Revelation 22:20). And in the present, we seek the Lord’s third advent—his continual in-breaking work in our lives. These three comings of Christ form us as we live in faithful anticipation.

Following Jesus in Advent is a deeply formative way to walk the peculiar path of discipleship. Advent is a time to watch, wait, and stay awake (Mark 13). It’s a season in which we take a hard look at the world’s darkness, injustice, and longing and say with the psalmist, “How long, O LORD?” (Psalm 13:1). This understanding of Advent chafes against the way we’re used to spending the weeks leading up to Christmas. Let’s be real: It can feel odd to sit in waiting and lament during the early weeks of December, while the fanfare of shopping and Mariah Carey’s Christmas anthems are all around us. (It will feel equally odd to insist on continuing to celebrate and feast for twelve days following Christmas Day.) By inhab-

iting this peculiarity, we follow Christians of the past who embraced the rhythms of sober preparation and patient waiting, rhythms we can offer to a busy and broken world by embracing them first ourselves. In Advent, waiting leads to the gift of Christlike formation in the present and fullhearted celebration in due time.

Advent Practices

What are the particular practices that mark worship and discipleship in Advent? We could name several, but these few form a helpful starting place for individuals and communities.

Countdown to Christmas in anticipation. There are a variety of ways to prayerfully count down to Christmas. One is the use of an Advent wreath, an embodied practice focused on the coming light of Christ. Each week, on Sunday, a purple candle is lit, with a pink or rose candle lit on the third Sunday of the season. (Traditions do vary across denominations, and it is fine to use purple candles on the third Sunday.) The candles enact light overcoming darkness. The fifth candle—the white Christ candle—is lit on Christmas Eve. Make the Advent wreath the centerpiece of your dining table, and engage in Scripture and prayer as you light a candle each Sunday in anticipation of Christ's advent.

Make room for lament. For many, the approach of Christmas is a time not of rejoicing but of sadness due to tragedy and loss. Since Advent begins in the dark, make room to lament. Where are you disappointed or experiencing loss? Bring these things before the Lord in prayer. Consider using the language of Psalm 13 and lighting a candle as you do so, letting the dancing flame remind you of the presence of God.

Immerse yourself in Advent hymns and music. Christmas music rejoices while Advent music vocalizes the longing of a world in need of rescue. Create a playlist of Advent hymns and music, and don't turn too quickly to the joy of your favorite Christmas anthems. Hymns such as "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," and "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending" are classics for good reason.

Consider the threats to keeping an intentional Advent. Because Advent is such a countercultural season in its call for reflection when the rest of our world calls for consumption and busyness, it's worth assessing what will keep you from embracing Advent the way you want to. Most of us will face these three threats: hurry, perfection, and noise. Here are helpful tips to overcome them:

1. **Hurry.** For many, late November and December are among the busiest times of the year. Busyness and hurry are enemies of the spiritual life. *Remedy:* Plan before the season starts. Consider doing Christmas shopping early—even before Advent begins. Pick your activities, traditions, family worship rhythms, and so forth ahead of time. This will add a sense of calm to your Advent experience.
2. **Expecting perfection.** The truth is you won't have a perfect Advent, nor will you live up to all your Advent plans. That's both fine and to be expected. *Remedy:* Reject attempts to "perform" at Advent. Simply do *something* with intention, try to stick with it, trust God's grace, and expect God to make this season meaningful in ways seen and unseen.
3. **Noise.** For those who live in a house with many roommates or children, the prospect of eliminating noise is a pipe

dream. While few of us can eliminate noise, many of us can limit it in various ways. *Remedy*: Decide in advance to limit noise, media, and consumerism to attend to God and others.

Advent Feast Days

Finally, each season has notable feast days in which the church is called into a deeper experience of the life of Christ together. Feast days are days of celebration and remembrance that point us to God's redemptive story and work in and through his church. Some include special church services while many can be noted and celebrated at home through specific prayers, meals, or Scripture readings.¹ Here are some notable feasts during Advent:

The Feast of Saint Nicholas (December 6). This day celebrates Saint Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop in Asia Minor who was deeply concerned with the poor. Tradition states Nicholas secretly came at night and left gold at the home of a family in grave need, providing the means to keep the daughters from entering slavery. Because the stories of Saint Nicholas have morphed into various secular forms of Santa Claus, our gift giving on Christmas can trace its lineage to this saint and feast. However, this feast day reminds us of our call to reflect the generosity of God through sacrificial giving and caring for the needy and offers a great opportunity to engage in this traditional Advent practice.

The Feast of Saint Lucia (December 13). This day celebrates Saint Lucy (or Lucia), a third-century Christian in Sicily who was martyred. According to church tradition, Saint Lucy, whose name means "light," often brought food to suf-

fering Christians who were hiding in catacombs to avoid persecution. It is believed Saint Lucia wore a wreath of candles on her head to light her path in the dark. This day thus celebrates the light of Christ that shines in the dark and offers a day of feasting amid the longing of Advent.

Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent). *Gaudete* means “rejoice” in Latin. In the midst of Advent’s sober call to wait and watch, Gaudete Sunday is a call to rejoice and wait in hope, knowing that the hope of the Incarnation at Christmas approaches. It is common to light a rose or pink candle on the Advent wreath or in the home to mark this day in representation of the coming celebration. In liturgical churches, this service infuses a jolt of joy into Advent in anticipation of Christmas.

Reading Advent Texts and Devotions

As you read the following Scripture texts and devotions, you’ll encounter riveting passages from Isaiah, the central Old Testament prophet of our readings. Isaiah confronts us with humanity’s brokenness and God’s gracious promises while our New Testament readings from James and Romans show how Christ’s return is transformative news for the vulnerable. These emphases highlight Advent’s focus on the coming of the Lord in power and glory. May these reflections enable you to set your hope on the Lord and to live in such a way that you are regarded by Jesus as one who “stays awake.”

First Week

Light and Dark

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:8–14

Matthew 24:29–44

The people who walked in darkness have
seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of
deep darkness, on them has light shone.

—Isaiah 9:2

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.¹



Advent is a gracious but demanding season. It is a season that “begins in the dark.”² Which is to say, Advent challenges us to see ourselves and the entire world as broken and in need of rescue and healing. Our Scripture readings graciously draw us into this essential work by shattering our unhealthy idealism. Our Isaiah and Romans readings highlight the contrast between the themes of light and dark, demanding that we attend to the harsh shadows of reality while believing that the light of hope has invaded and prevailed and, at the right time, will again. In this way, Advent calls us to be faith-filled realists, seeing things as they really are, without becoming despairing pessimists, believing no hope is on the way. Advent guides us into the serious work of hoping in God alone, trusting in the light even when it seems we are surrounded only by darkness.

Rival Advent Voices: Hebrew Prophets and American Celebrities

For these reasons, Isaiah is an essential Advent text, concerned with warning, preparation, judgment, and salvation. Isaiah prophesied several centuries before Christ’s birth when things were especially dark for God’s people. In Isaiah 1, we find that they are unfaithful and idolatrous. In Isaiah 8:22, we hear that this people “will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.” The people of God, Isaiah declares, have chosen suffocating darkness over life-giving light. They turned to false gods and nations to save them. They turned to sorcery and spiritualists to find help and rescue. In the end, they received nothing but gloom.

In the face of judgment, Isaiah points the way to Bethle-

hem and the first Advent truth: The promise of light must come from outside us and despite us. This is what many Protestant reformers described in speaking of salvation as *extra nos*, something that comes from outside ourselves. And if we're honest, it is not the sort of truth we like to hear, as it boldly counters the story we prefer to tell about ourselves. Our preferred story is often revealed in the figures our society most reveres: our celebrities. In 1985, more than forty famous musical artists, headlined by Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson, collaborated to raise money and awareness for USA for Africa's poverty relief. The world's great entertainers—Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and others—gathered and sang a song for the occasion called "We Are the World."³ Take note of some of the lyrics and the story they tell:

*We are the ones who make a brighter day. . . .
We're saving our own lives.*

Relief efforts are admirable, of course. But these musical voices sing a different tune than the prophetic voice we hear in Isaiah. In making a genuine difference, the song conveys the human myth that we *are* the difference. We pull together our best efforts and we save ourselves. This is the human folly that Isaiah warns against, for we cannot and do not light up the darkness. Commendable as relief is, there are no cheap answers in the dark. We cannot make a brighter day despite our best efforts.

Through Isaiah, God declares that the light does not arrive through human initiative; it arrives through an invasion. Isaiah 9:2 makes it plain: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." The verbs are passive. In other words,

God saves, and we receive—rather than create, contribute, or earn—the light of his rescuing grace.

Here is the great turn in our Isaiah passage: The people and the land that are trapped in spiritual and political darkness, staring death and extinction in the face, will see light. Light will shine on them. And not only on them but also on “all nations” through them. Read again Isaiah’s vision:

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning
Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD. (2:1–5, NIV)

This is the great thrill of Christian hope. However, Isaiah's word presents a different sort of challenge—not of human darkness but of God's promise. It is a divine dream, wonderful and deeply aligned with pure human desire. But given all the darkness around us, this dream feels like a cruel joke. Army tanks turned to lawn mowers? Nations unlearning war? All peoples moving like a river in reverse, up to the holy hill of the triune God? *Give us a break*, we think silently in our souls.

Yet the pattern of Advent faith is not only to be acquainted with the dark but also to live in longing for—and in step with—this divine dream and promise. To put it another way, we must realize that “the night is far gone; the day is at hand” (Romans 13:12). We inch closer to the judgment that brings peace to the world. This is why the great vision of the end of all things in Isaiah 2 comes in the context of judgment but is centered on a merciful invitation: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD” (verse 5). Here's Isaiah's Advent message: Let this great promise of God, this divine dream, have its full effect on us here and now. Let us walk in the light even though our sins are many and the days are dark as night.

Advent Attire: Casting Off Darkness and Putting on Light

How exactly are we to walk forward in light? Listen again to the apostle Paul: “Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). Advent is therefore a time of serious business and weighty preparation. Open yourself before the Lord through these Advent questions:

- What works of darkness do I need to unlearn?
- Where do I need to put on Jesus's words, Jesus's way, Jesus's life?
- Where does Jesus want to come into my life and heart with his light and grace?

No one can answer these deep questions for you. Keep company with God and his grace by engaging with these questions as gentle guides throughout Advent. If we listen closely to the apostle Paul, we'll learn some of the works of darkness we can no longer be at peace with. If the day of the Lord means the end of hostility and idolatry, then casting off the works of darkness means seeking to uproot these deadly seeds from the soil of our souls.

Ancient Christians reflected at length on the deadly sins of pride, envy, anger, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth. They spoke of these vices in sobering terms: "Keep a special watch for the one that unfailingly attacks you, whether you stand, walk, sit, get up, pray or sleep."⁴ Will you turn from unforgiveness? Will you make an end of bitterness? Will you pull the plug on jealousy? This week, don't let your holiday party look be the only attire that receives your deep consideration. Give prayerful thought to the works of vice you need to put off and the virtues of Christ you need to be clothed in.

To put on Jesus is to put on the great "light of the world" (John 8:12). When you repent and believe, you have put him on. When you walk in his teaching, when you come to his table to receive communion, and when you believe the promise, you put him on. When you anticipate his return, you put him on. Call out, even feebly, to the Light of the world and he will shine on you. Because the great Light has come once and is returning, the darkness in the world—and the darkness lurking in our hearts—will yield. Even today, even now, the great

Light arrives daily on you. As the darkness in you is increasingly banished, the radiance of his light on you, in you, and through you can shine (Matthew 5:16).

Remember how Isaiah spoke of a mountain and a hill to which the nations would flow? Jesus is the one at the holy hill of God who said, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all humanity to me” (see John 12:32). Jesus’s cross is the hill from which God’s saving light goes out to the nations, fulfilling Isaiah’s Advent truth that rescue comes from God, not us. Jesus’s return is the place of judgment that brings peace. Thus, casting off vice is incomplete without putting on the One who is the light that saves from darkness. The Light has shone, shines still, and will soon blaze in full glory.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you hope to experience or be encouraged by as you journey through Advent? Take a moment to prayerfully write down your thoughts, and revisit them through this season.
2. How does the truth that Advent begins “in the dark” encourage us to be honest with God and ourselves about the state of our lives and the world?
3. Spend some time praying and reflecting on this week’s themed prayer. How might this prayer help you step into the beginning of Advent with fresh attentiveness to the Lord and his love and will for you?