

I-K Lutheran

Where God is doing new things

December 2018

Ding dong, ding dong, Christmas bells are ringing!

Christmas bells have been ringing for weeks. Cultural/Commercial Christmas seems to arrive earlier each year. I noticed Christmas décor appearing in stores and steaming coffee served in red holiday cups before Halloween. Community Christmas trees were being lit up in some places by early November. Christmas music will have been wafting through the air for weeks – at least in some places – by the time you read this little reflection.



I used to rail against this phenomenon. Well, I didn't rail exactly; I rarely rail. But I did criticize it, complain about it, and otherwise disparage it as an affront to Advent and, ultimately, to Christmas. This early arrival of Christmas, culturally and commercially, seemed to be a headlong rush toward shallow happiness without taking time to prepare ourselves to receive Christmas's deeper gift of promises fulfilled. Without care-full preparation, I would argue, we may well miss the deep joy and bright light of promises fulfilled in ways that match and exceed the depth of the darkness in which we wait for them. As last year's "Sundays and Seasons" resource put it, "...Advent has often been understood as Christmas's Lenten counterpart—a season of preparation for a particular feast..."

I do still believe that and, consequently, I also believe that the good news of Christmas is best served within our communities of faith by a season of preparation for it. We need time to acknowledge and live into our deep yearnings and to admit our own inability to satisfy them if we are going to be open to and joyfully celebrate God's answer to those yearnings. It's important that we create space in our worship life as communities of faith and in the rhythms of our families' Advent days, both to resist the commercialization and commodification of Christmas and to spiritually prepare to welcome again God's promises with open hearts. This might include refraining from singing Christmas carols in worship, or the lighting of an increasing number of candles as Christmas Day draws nearer, or the addition of spiritual devotion, reflection, or conversation focused on what we wait and hope for this particular season and to hear again the promises that come to meet us in our waiting.

I also have come to believe, however, that there is something deeper beneath the world's rush to Christmas, something beyond the commercialization and commodification. Again, "Sundays and Seasons" said it pretty well: "Our readings in this season serve a deeper liturgical purpose than simply helping us resist the commercialization of the holiday season and more reverently celebrate Christmas. Advent is indeed a season of anticipation, but also of revolution: 'The world is about to turn,' as we sing in Rory Cooney's fiery paraphrase of the Magnificat (ELW 723). The readings in Advent prepare us to receive not only a new baby, but a new world where God's justice and mercy reign."

I have come to see and hear the early arrival of cultural and commercial Christmas as an expression – even if a secular, misguided, or sappy expression – of the world's deep craving for Christmas. The world yearns for the very world-toppling revolution offered as God is borne in human flesh, the establishment of new world in which God's justice and mercy reign over and for all.

This suggests, to me at least, that we walk our way toward Christmas with one eye on our own need for what this amazing story offers for us and the other focused on offering this Christmas gift to those who will not be gathered in a sanctuary somewhere on Christmas Eve lifting candles and singing “Silent Night.”

This holy season, I invite you to join me in the midst of the shopping, the wrapping, the decorating, the incessant Christmas carols, and the feasting to stop, look and listen deeply to the people around us. I invite you to see their need, to listen for their deepest Advent yearnings, and to find ways – in word and deed – to point to the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, and say with the prophet Isaiah, “See, your salvation comes!”

All-powerful and unseen God, the coming of your light into our world has brightened weary hearts with peace. Call us out of darkness and empower us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (ELW, Prayer of the Day, Christmas Day)

-- Bishop Bill Gafkjen

The beloved hymn, *Silent Night*, is 200 years old this year.



Silent-Night-Chapel in Oberndorf, where the song was first performed.

Native name: Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht

Full: Silent Night, Holy Night

Text: Joseph Mohr

Language: German

Melody: Franz Xaver Gruber

Performed 24 December 1818

Published: 1833



Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.