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Spirituality



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Months ago, my 7-year-old nephew told me what he wanted for Christmas. "Christmas is a long way off," I tried to explain, but to no avail. The prospect of gifts grabbed his imagination and took hold.

Advent hadn't even started, and it was hard for him to believe that it wasn't Christmas yet. I don't blame him. After all, over the last few weeks, I've seen pictures of friends beside their Christmas trees and been bombarded with advertisements that are clearly telling me I'm behind the curve on decorating.

My heart aches for the simple sound of "Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel" and yet "Do You Hear What I Hear?" echoes in my ears. Advent, it seems, has taken a backseat to the hubbub of Christmas.

Traditionally, Advent is the peaceful beginning to our year. It is a time of preparation. It is a season filled with hope and promise; a liturgical invitation to four weeks of joyful journeying in anticipation of Christ's coming into the world — past, present, and future.

Yet, over the last few years and decades, the expectation of the season seems to have been transformed from that of expectant waiting for Christ's coming to a frenzied flurry of preparations for a season of parties and holiday cheer. Advent has unceremoniously and inadvertently become a final countdown to December 25. Filled with Christmas carols that began playing long before our Advent wreaths were unboxed and lights that have been on houses since the end of October, Advent is a season in need of revival.

The expectation of what is to come is a gift. If we choose to engage this time of waiting, Advent has the power to deepen our celebration, enlivening the joy that makes itself manifest in myriad manner of decorations and celebrations these days. This joy is contagious. In the midst of dark days, physically and societally, people long to embrace and embody it. That desire is so deep that anything will do.

Recently, a friend lamented that all she wanted to do after a long day was go home, put on Christmas music, and maybe bake some cookies or watch a Hallmark movie. The shifting light of winter days, drastically emphasized by the end of Daylight Saving Time in our country, called for the spark of joy and creature comforts

contained in those well-worn traditions.

"It's a great distraction" she said with a grin, "No news, no nonsense, just a chance to get lost for a little while … to escape from the worries of the world."

I can understand her sentiment. I think we all can. The impeachment hearings alone make me wonder where the closest cup of cocoa is.

The joy, however, that Advent brings isn't a cheap kind of escapism. Nor is it a distraction from the realities of the world. Rather, it is the joy that comes from encountering Goodness, the peace and respite found in attentively engaging our world as a gift from God, even in the midst of what is troubling and what demands us to be attentive with action.

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We spend this season making space for joy — that is, the peaceful, triumphant birth of the Divine in our midst. The new space that we are making requires intention. It isn't meant to be filled with preparations that raise our anxiety and stress; it's about embodying all the graces that come from expectation. It is about making room for the simple joys, the graces of God. These are the true gifts of this season: hope at the fulfillment of God's faith-filled promises, joy at encountering Love in the people and circumstance of our lives, and comfort that comes from (and contributes to) the peace of God's presence and the faithful witnessing to and engagement in Jesus's coming, yesterday, today, and always.

The joy of this season also calls for serious action. As we engage the gifts that spark joy, we recognize the need to bring joy to our advocacy. Our preparations are not just for Christmas day but so that all might know and experience the grace of God and the coming of the Kingdom in the here and now. Just as John the Baptist heralded the coming of Christ, our living out of our faith should speak to the One we are preparing the way for. With joy we work these Advent days especially so that Jesus might find a place of welcome in our world as we welcome and care for our neighbors and all of creation.

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While Christmas permeates the collective consciousness, it will do us good to pause for Advent moments along the way. These moments of recollection give light to the darkness, revealing the reason for the season. We don't rejoice simply for the sake of good cheer and blessed company; we abide in the profound joy of being companioned by Jesus as he is born anew in our lives.

Such assurance is a blessing that brings with it comfort and joy. It is more than any gift we could give or any party we could plan, it is the grace of Advent, a gift freely given if we are free and attentive enough to receive it. May we pause with purpose in these days, making space for Goodness in our midst, and answering the invitation of our God to be open to the gift that keeps on giving, to the One who dwells in the giftedness of all — Christmas, Advent, and all together — ordinary times.

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published work in various periodicals including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.