

IS THE ADVENT SEASON IRRATIONAL?

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What would your reaction be if someone told you that you were irrational? Usually this is not meant as a compliment, and we would probably be offended. However, in her book by this title, Madeline L'Engle describes Advent as "the irrational season," and she means to pay it a kind of compliment. Advent marks the beginning of the Church Year, and there are several reasons why it may be appropriate to think of it as "the irrational season."

First of all, Advent has always had a kind of mixed personality. Sometime around the eighth century a couple of different traditions came together to create the season of Advent. One strand saw it as a time of preparation for the coming glorious event of the incarnation, with all the anticipation and excitement which accompanies that. Another tradition emphasized the need for penitence and soul-searching, not unlike the season of Lent, as we try to get ourselves ready to receive such an awesome gift. So one reason why Advent may be a bit irrational is that it has always had this identity problem. The Church has never been quite sure what Advent's personality was supposed to be. In recent years, liturgical blue has replaced the traditional purple in order to distinguish Advent from the Lenten season and give it more of its own identity.

There is a more serious reason why Advent is termed irrational. Advent calls upon us to prepare for God's future, but at the same time to realize that we cannot create that future. Preparing for something is different from creating it, and we sometimes get that confused. One of the great themes of Advent is watchfulness. In some of Jesus' teachings, the call to be watchful is set in the terms of ancient apocalyptic theology, where the end of the world will come suddenly as a thief in the night. (Matthew 24:36-44, Mark 13:32-37) We have to translate this traditional language. There are deep stirrings and longings within us that say, this is not really the world that God intended. We hope for something more—something beyond the pain and brokenness of our present world. Faith believes that God is creating this new world, and so we are watching for it. We do not know when it will break into our hearts, but Advent calls us to prepare and be ready. When it happens, everything will be changed—our way of seeing, responding, loving, and living.

In the Broadway musical *Cabaret* a group of young Nazis sing a song entitled "Tomorrow belongs to me." But this is of course a lie—it was for the Nazis and it is for all of us. Tomorrow does not belong to us, but only to God. Because we are separated from God, we do not like to

face this, and it lies at the root of human anxiety. Advent challenges us to watch for the future that God creates solely out of God's love for us, but which we have no power to create ourselves. Personally, I would like to have it a different way. I would like to control my own future, thank you. I would remove from that future uncertainty and pain, and the need for a long painful journey of spiritual growth. In the future that I would control, there would be only pleasantness and sunny days. So Advent is an irrational season, which calls upon us to watch for something that we cannot control. We can only prepare for it, but we can't create it. We have to rely on God to give us a future, and this makes us anxious.

Advent also seems irrational in that it calls us to keep watching for God's kingdom, even when nothing seems to be happening. How differently the Church's new year comes, compared with that of the world! There is not a noisier time the whole year long than New Year's Eve in secular society. There is lots of revelry, racket, and intoxication. Advent, on the other hand, is absurdly quiet. The hymns, the preacher, and the liturgy all dutifully announce that this is the Church's new year's day, and nothing much happens.

We are likely to wonder, what is going on here? And the answer seems to be that nothing directly perceivable is. That is so much like God. Remember, God is the one who sometimes likes to speak in a "still, small voice," and often prefers to be present in the sounds of silence. It is as if God says, "Guess what. This is new year's day and in this season I always like to remind you that I am making a new world." And we may feel like saying, "Fine, where is it?"

That's what it's like to watch. We don't have to watch for what we can already see. The watching of the irrational season is something like watching over our children, believing that a tiny, helpless infant can become a strong, mature human being. It is like watching a newly planted field or garden, believing day by day that from this bare surface of ground new life will emerge to feed and sustain us. But the hardest watching of all is watching over our own hearts. Day by day, we ask for God to create God's future within us in that barren space which often seems so empty and afraid. And we may get frustrated because the process seems so slow and gradual.

Yes, Advent is the irrational season. It reveals once again that the people of faith stand in a strange and contradictory place – we watch for what we cannot yet see, or see, as St. Paul said, only "in a glass darkly." Reginald Fuller, the noted New Testament professor at Virginia Seminary, once said that Christians are people who "stand in the dark with their faces lit by the

coming dawn." That is an irrational place to be. It's hard to explain to others. We feel the darkness of our fear and doubt so powerfully, and yet our faces are turned toward those faint rays of dawn that are already appearing on God's new horizon, the future that God is already creating. We watch, therefore, for what will be given to us, but which we cannot of our own strength create. In one way of viewing it, that causes deep anxiety— we are not in charge of our future. In another way of viewing it, it lifts an unbearable burden— we do not have to keep striving after the impossible. Life is a gift we can only receive, not control.

"Watch, therefore," said Jesus, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." No doubt about it. In this irrational season known as the human pilgrimage, we do not know when the great issues of life will turn on their hinges, and we will be confronted with the Advent call to face a new horizon. Just as Jesus said, we never know how or when God is coming. We only know *that* God is coming. This is the promise of Advent, the strange, irrational season, when we are called to watch and to make room for the new world that God is creating and that breaks in upon us at the most unexpected times. We will never fully understand God's ways, but in those extremities of life when all *our* ways have failed, God breaks in like a thief and steals our false securities, opening us up to a new world and an unfolding future. As Madeline L'Engle says:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

(The Irrational Season, p.27)

"Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."