



## **Beginning Again...With Advent**

**Rev. David Hughes**

*When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves."*

- Eugene Peterson

I can still remember the first time I heard the word, "lectionary." I was sitting in a preaching class at Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-1970s. The professor casually referred to the lectionary as a guide to devotional reading and preaching that would surely be as familiar to us as the Bible itself. Other students acted as though this was old news. Privately, I was utterly embarrassed because I had never heard of a lectionary!

See, I had grown up in a Southern Baptist church that had never mentioned a lectionary, or for that matter, the "Christian year." We celebrated Christmas and Easter, of course, with great fanfare. But I had no idea that a season called Advent preceded Christmas, or that twelve additional days of Christmastide followed December 25. I knew nothing of Epiphany, or Ash Wednesday, or Lent. I knew about Palm Sunday, was barely familiar with Good Friday, but had never heard of Maundy Thursday or Holy Saturday. I looked forward to "Trick-or-Treating" on Halloween every year, but didn't understand that Halloween was All Hallows Eve that preceded All Saints day.

Even if I had known of these dates and seasons of the Christian year, like most Baptists I would have likely dismissed them as being "too Catholic" to observe. And even if I had been aware of a planned pattern of scripture readings called the "lectionary," as a "free Baptist" I might have objected to submitting to an orderly list of readings someone else had planned.

### **Transforming Rhythms**

Have I ever changed! Like so many Baptists, and so many in the Protestant Evangelical world, I have been influenced by the "modern liturgical movement" in a way that has profoundly enriched my Christian life and ministry.

After my seminary experience, I began to use the lectionary selectively to inform my

preaching. And I led the churches I pastored to pay attention to the Christian year. I cannot honestly say, however, that the readings of the lectionary nurtured my own soul until I became involved with the Transforming Center almost four years ago. It was through my experience in the *Transforming Community*® that I was introduced to the idea of meditating upon the designated lectionary readings during the week preceding the Sunday they were used in worship.

Developing a life-rhythm that allowed me to meditate upon Scripture may not seem terribly profound. ***But (and this is embarrassing to admit!) I was so accustomed to sermonizing from Scripture that I rarely, if ever, sat with Scripture just to give God an opportunity to speak into my soul.*** My experience with the Transforming Center not only convinced me I needed to let Scripture shape my soul before it shaped my sermon; it also taught me an ancient meditative practice called *lectio divina* that gives God ample opportunity to speak into the deep places of my soul, places that desperately need to hear God's healing, life-giving word.

I have learned that if I submit my life to the ancient rhythms of the Christian year, and submit my mind and heart to the recommended readings of the lectionary that parallel the Christian year, God can more readily transform me into the image of his son. ***Simply put, the more deeply I am rooted in the story of Jesus, the more like Jesus I become.***

Since the earliest centuries of the church Christians have followed the rhythms of the Christian year as a means of centering their individual lives and life together around the life of Jesus Christ. (An excellent resource is *Living the Christian Year*, Bobby Gross, InterVarsity Press, 2009) The lectionary guides us in living these rhythms by providing a series of scriptures to be read in private and public worship. As we follow the three-year lectionary cycle, we relive key events in the life of Jesus. Meditating upon these passages gives us an opportunity to center *our* lives around these events and to learn the lessons contained within them. If we are faithful to this plan of submitting ourselves to God's written Word, it will become more alive in our hearts. And we will become more like the Living Word, Jesus Christ!

## **Beginning Again**

The liturgical year begins with the first Sunday of Advent—four Sundays before Christmas Day. During these four weeks we prepare for Christ's *advent*, or his coming. This is a time of anticipation and longing for the coming of the Messiah. On Christmas we rejoice with the Shepherds that our Savior has been born, and then extend that celebration twelve more days! And on January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, we remember Jesus' manifestation (epiphany) to the Wise Men, and continue in subsequent Sundays to review Jesus' earthly ministry.

Since adhering to the Christian year (including the use of lectionary Scripture readings suggested for worship) is meant to foster our spiritual transformation, and since pursuing transformation is what the Transforming Center is all about, once again we will launch a new Christian year together starting on the first Sunday of Advent, November 28. By engaging the lectionary passages for each week of Advent, we will watch and wait for the

coming of Christ in the places where we need his presence most.

This year we will follow the “Cycle A” assigned readings that will usually include a passage from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a Gospel reading (typically from Matthew), and a reading from the epistles. [Click here to view Cycle A lectionary readings for this Advent/Christmas season.](#) Your Advent reading will arrive a few days before Sunday so that you are “reading into” the lectionary passages for that Sunday. Our prayer is that this series will provide you with a few moments of private reflection on the themes of Advent even as you lead others through this busy season.

### **A Different Kind of Calendar**

Robert Webber writes in *Ancient-Future Faith* that “by observing the church year, time is aligned with the living, dying, rising, and coming of Christ. The Christian, in his or her view of time, makes a dramatic break with a secular view of time and begins to consciously meditate on the aspect of Christ’s life currently being celebrated by the church.”

Our hope, in offering these Advent readings, is that those of us who are leaders in Christ’s Church will use these days and weeks as an opportunity for our own spiritual transformation which is our best preparation for leading others. To do so will, in Webber’s words, require a “dramatic break with a secular view of time”. It will require adherence to an entirely different kind of calendar, one that is focused upon walking with Christ through the seasons of his life and allowing him to teach and transform us as we go.

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