

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Advent Sunday  
December 1, 2019

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The Advent Season puts three topics on our plate. They have to do with *the three comings of Christ*: at Bethlehem, into our hearts by grace in our Christmas communions, and at the end of the world. In our secular world, however, Advent becomes little more than a prequel to “Here Comes Santa Claus.” The foremost reality for many people on the first day of December is “get your shopping done now!”

But we are in jeopardy of ignoring *the great theme of Advent* if we concentrate on shopping during the four weeks before the Babe is placed in a Manger. The ancient Jews had the great images of the Prophet Isaiah ringing in their ears: images of judgment, trial, and purgation. Those images become the stuff of life. If modern Americans settle instead for television jingles and an entire month of canned Christmas music playing as we queue up at cash registers, then no wonder our souls never rise to the majestic heights of “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” And the tell-tale sign that we missed the mark is in the sad sight of Christmas trees and tinsel on the curb on December 26<sup>th</sup>. In Advent we need to remember that in the years preceding the coming of Christ, *waiting for God’s future* was the very definition of the whole nation.

Time is God’s gift to us. And the question is: “Do we use it well?” This does not mean time for Christmas shopping! It means *time as waiting*. Our Lord said, “Be constantly on guard. Stay awake. You know not when the appointed time will come.” By the way, “stay awake” doesn’t mean Christians become insomniacs! Staying awake means to live in such a way as to be *alert* to God’s ways and His message.

Christmas Day in the year 2019 is not what we are waiting for in Advent. We are waiting for God’s advent, not a yearly commemoration of a past event. The Christmas Mass is important, not because it is December 25<sup>th</sup>, but because it is the Mass, and *Jesus is there*. And the best sign of His coming is in our *waiting and expectation*.

We wait for all sorts of things to happen. We wait for people. In New York City you wait by the southwest corner steps of St Patrick’s Cathedral. In Chicago you

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wait under the clock at *Marshall Field's*. In Philadelphia you meet people at the eagle in *Wanamaker's*. And the person you waited for arrived more or less on time. A sign of his coming is your waiting and expectation. But God's ways are not our ways, (as both Scripture and our own experience remind us.) God is the One Who precisely does *not* come, but is waited for. This does not mean Almighty God is an eternal "no show." Creation will not just fizzle out with the instruction: "Last one out turn out the lights!" Creation will end in divine consummation. Our Lord Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

We call our Lord Jesus by many names. And a particular one in Advent and Christmas is "*Emmanuel*," which means "**God with us.**" But Almighty God is as much an *absence* as a presence. Of course His sacramental presence is not an absence. But it fills us with hunger and thirst, culminating in our eager longing now, at a time we "See through a glass darkly," to that time when we will "behold Him face to face."

If all of this seems like speaking in paradox or in riddles, remember Sir Francis Bacon who said, "In religion it is not *either/or* but *both/and.*" Using ordinary speech about God's coming is to say nothing. We want the Kingdom of God: its perfect justice and peace, just as ancient Israel did. And we show our total trust in God by *awaiting His coming*. Our waiting, and how we use it, is the special gift ingredient in our Advent worship.