

NOT YET CHRISTMAS



IT'S TIME FOR ADVENT

A DAILY READER

J. D. Walt

**NOT YET
CHRISTMAS**

IT'S TIME FOR ADVENT

A DAILY READER

J. D. Walt

Dave Harrity
Poetry Editor

Copyright 2014 by Seedbed Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission, except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles.

Scripture quotations are taken from NRSV the Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version/Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.—Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, c 1989. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from
THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Printed in the United States of America

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-62824-158-7

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-62824-159-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-62824-160-0

uPDF ISBN: 978-1-62824-161-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014948598

Cover and page design by Brushfire Design Studio

SEEDBED PUBLISHING

Franklin, Tennessee

Seedbed.com

SOWING FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Introduction	ix
Anthem of Advent	xi
A Prayer for the Opening of Advent	3
1 It's Time to Remember the Future	6
2 It's Time to Learn to Stand on a Word	8
3 It's Time to Ask the Deeper Questions	10
4 It's Time to Shed Our Cynicism	12
5 It's Time to Sing the Old Song	14
6 It's Time to Teach Patience a Bigger Perspective	16
7 It's Time to Put on the Armor of Light	18
8 It's Time to Plow the Fallow Ground	20
9 It's Time to Believe Impossible Things	22
10 It's Time to Listen for a Word Beyond the Voices of Our Time	24
11 It's Time to Sift Our Closets	26
12 It's Time for Repentance to Be More About Aspirations than Failures	28
13 It's Time to Question Our Assumptions About the Way God Works	30
14 It's Time to De-Sentimentalize Christmas	32
15 It's Time to Consider Ultimate Things	34
16 It's Time for a Refresher Course on the Meaning of Holiness	36
17 It's Time to Recalibrate Our Pace	38
18 It's Time to Deal with Our Anxiety	40

19	It's Time to Name Our Holy Discontent	42
20	It's Time to Re-See the Signs	44
21	It's Time to Revisit First Things	46
22	It's Time to Do Hard Things	48
23	It's Time to Behold the Miracle	50
24	It's Time to Go to Bethlehem	52
25	It's Time for Christmas	54
	About the Poets	57

P R E F A C E

A Word to Christian Communities and Those Who Lead Them

It's time . . .

It's time to stop crying in our soup about the consumeristic commercialization of Christmas. Instead of bashing the culture for making Black Friday bigger than Thanksgiving, let's do something different this year. Let's do Advent. Instead of shaming each other for giving more to our children instead of digging wells in Africa, let's give the Holy Spirit room to narrate us into a bigger story, one that might send our hearts to Africa and not just our money. Shame might increase the amount of change we put into the kettles outside the mall this year, but it will not make us the people and communities God intends us to become.

Instead of quibbling over saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," let's recover what it means to celebrate Holy Days. Instead of our cheesy slogans about the "Reason for the Season," let's just do the season. Let's joyfully embrace the fact that we will do Advent in the midst of a culture that loves Christmas but doesn't really understand it. But let's not be mad about it. We do not live in a Christian culture. We live in an American culture. Our privileged responsibility is to be real Christians in this particular culture. We need not be against this culture anymore than we need to baptize it. Jesus is not competing with Santa. Let's embrace it by singing along with "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Jingle Bells." Let's roast

chestnuts over an open fire. Let's learn to be a hospitable guest in what can be a hostile culture.

What this culture most needs from the church is real Christians. That's what Advent is designed to do. Advent lifts our hearts to a future of unparalleled possibility and beckons us to awaken from the predictable certainty that our lives have become. Advent rings in a new year, offering Christians once more the chance to begin again. Let us together set our feet on the path of pilgrimage, the way of purposeful wandering.

Advent reverses the tired cliché of Christmas, "The Reason for the Season," by offering us a "Season for the Reason." When the church reclaims Advent, the culture will behold Christmas.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Advent

I don't deny that there should be priests to remind men that they will one day die. I only say . . . it is necessary to have another kind of priests, called poets, actually to remind men that they are not dead yet.

—G. K. Chesterton

It's time to return to Advent.

It's time to give prophets a hearing again, listening with the playful intensity of a child hearing a story for the first time.

It's time to slow down long enough to amble through the intolerable ambiguity of poems, submitting to a meaning we cannot comprehend until we surrender our need to control it.

It's time to begin again, only this time with the end in sight, to lift our eyes first to the clouds on which he will come, before we fix them on the star of his first arrival.

It's time to teach our children that the grass will wither and the flower will fade but the Word of the Lord will endure forever.

Advent reminds us of a certain event, a day on the horizon of the future which will reorder every last molecule of the universe. This event is the second coming of Jesus Christ. Despite all the uncertainties of timing, this event is a fixed certainty. The message of the gospel: Do not be afraid. Be prepared.

How This Reader Works

Each of the twenty-five days offers a carefully chosen text from the Bible, each of which the church has read for many centuries during the season of Advent. Following the text, there is a short bit of narration designed to steadily guide the reader along the path of pilgrimage, day by day. Finally, each day closes with a prayer in the form of a poem. J. D. Walt serves as the narrator. Dave Harrity has carefully curated a host of award-winning poets to provide our prayers. The arrangement aims to slow us down, to break pace with the normal routine. We are creating space to behold, to hear a fresh word from the Holy Spirit, to catch a glimpse of a new horizon, to sing the song of the future.

ANTHEM OF ADVENT

It's ironic. The song the church tends to save until Christmas Eve, "Joy to the World," is actually not a Christmas carol. It's an Advent anthem. It's a song about the second coming of Jesus. It's a sign that we've so Christmas-ized Advent that we turn one of the few and precious songs about the Second Advent into a carol for the first Christmas. Take a look:

Joy to the World

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her King;

Let every heart prepare him room,

And Heaven and nature sing,

And Heaven and nature sing,

And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!

Let men their songs employ;

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat the sounding joy,

Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders, of his love.

—*Isaac Watts*

**NOT YET
CHRISTMAS**

A PRAYER FOR THE OPENING OF ADVENT

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead [your people] like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

—PSALM 80:1

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

—ISAIAH 64:4

Come, Holy Spirit, and inaugurate Advent in our midst. Come and open up the book of a new year of our Lord. Lift our hearts to long for your coming and deepen our longing to imagine your kingdom.

We confess—Advent, the season of holy anticipation, has become for us a sign of anxiety. Like Martha, we busy ourselves with so many things, preparing for a celebration of our own design. We confess—our attention has become distraction. Our hearts, minds, and souls are divided as we literally surf the channels of our consumeristic culture. “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8). Begin anew this Advent to shape us. Make us like Mary to sit at the feet of our Lord Jesus and discover the only necessary thing: your Presence. Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Shape these days of Advent into a season of undivided attention, of holy anticipation.

As we sing of peace on Earth and goodwill to all people, open our ears to hear the mournful songs of a war-torn world: the unquenchable cries of ordinary families like our own whose losses are beyond our ability to comprehend. As we prepare to wrap the countless gifts our children will open on Christmas morning, open our hearts to the countless children for whom Christmas morning will be yet another day to survive. Lead us to respond to you in remembering those who will otherwise receive nothing, who are orphaned, whose parents are dead, distant, or imprisoned. Open our eyes to see those neighbors nearest to us who are lonely, afraid, sick, and suffering. We confess—our lifestyles have become enclaves of escape from the pain and suffering that surrounds us. “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8). Let this year be different, Lord. Shape our attention in these days of Advent into a lifestyle of love for neighbor and the needy.

“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead [your people] like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth” (Ps. 80:1). “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence” (Isa. 64:1). As we remember and celebrate the birth of the baby in Bethlehem, let us not forget that the King is returning. We confess—we have made ourselves at home in a world that is not our home. We know a time is coming when the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give us light, when the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. We know the Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory and he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (see Mark 13:24–27). Stir in our hearts a holy anticipation for the world to come, and an undying urgency for the world that is passing away. By your Spirit, make us watchful and wakeful. For, “O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8).

Come, Holy Spirit, and inaugurate Advent in our midst. Come and open up the book of a new year of our Lord. Hear us as we pray:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.*

—MATTHEW 6:9–13 NIV

IT'S TIME TO REMEMBER THE FUTURE

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

—JAMES 5:7-11 NIV

It's time that we come to terms with this fact: the return of the Lord is a good thing. Is it not? But you say, there are so many people I know who are not ready for this—the end of all things broken and the fulfillment of all things made new. And so, the Advent question of questions: What about these people you love? Have you spoken to them concerning the end of all things broken and the fulfillment of all things made new? And how about you? Are you ready? If not, there is only one good reason.

It is because you are not sure the return of the Lord is a good thing.

Think about it. The return of the Lord means: No more child slavery. No more sex trade. No more cancer. No more drug addiction. No more tears. No more terrorism. No more war. No more starvation. No more wheelchairs. The sheen of newness everywhere. The contagion of gladness spreading like wildfire.

All of this and more only begins to describe the extremity of the will of God, which is the totality of his love.

Waiting

*I will watch and listen;
I will work and pray.
The extremity of Your will
is the totality of Love.*

From my winter window,
I look to the yard
covered in fresh snow.

I recall two goldfinches
playing tag on the sunflowers
as I planted
those seedling redbuds
at the edge of our yard
last summer.

Worry eased from my mind
with each small, careful
shovelful of earth.

*The totality of Your will
is the extremity of Love.
I will watch and work;
I will pray and listen.*

Now the cold has set in
and the sunflowers are gone
and I say to the Lord only this:
there is so much I can't do
and some that I can.
Help me do and help me wait.

Lord who is near
and full of mercy,
if patience is presence,
make me present to now,
to this bleak sky.
Give me the patience
of the goldfinch,
of the child who delights
in plain blades of grass,
in the simple witness of snow.

—*Daniel Bowman Jr.*

IT'S TIME TO LEARN TO STAND ON A WORD

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

—LUKE 21:25-36

It never failed. Every time I visited the small main street furniture store, the aging widow, the woman of God, asked me the question, “John David, what Word are you standing on today?” She always knew the Word on which she stood. Me? I’m still learning. For on that day when he comes, the Word will be the only place left to stand. And what a spacious, beautiful place it will be.

Now Is the Time to Stand Up

When my heart is heavy,
When my heart is convinced
And my eyes see the signs
That everything is meaningless—
That everything is lost,
I turn to my legs and whisper,
“Now is the time to stand up.”

May your words be the earth beneath me.
May your words be a snare
That keep me from the trap
Of believing only what I see,
Of believing the signs
But not the Signifier.

Now is the time to stand up.

—*Drew Causey*

IT'S TIME TO ASK THE DEEPER QUESTIONS

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

—ISAIAH 2:1–5

It's time to ask the questions: What of my life? Am I fashioning myself as a sword or being fashioned into a plow? I want to be sharpened for the glory of God. I must be bent instead for the glory of the ground. I want to climb the mountain, take the hill, ascend to greatness. I must learn to churn the soil so my children might come after me sowing seeds of Light. What will be my legacy? What do I leave in my wake—a fertile furrow or a monument to myself?

These words are not practical, you say. And you are correct. These words purpose to unshackle us from the false security of a safe existence. You were made for more. You were crafted to express the impractical extravagance of Holy Love.

The Mountain of You

How can I climb the mountain of you Lord?

Where are the dusty cuts carved out?

I've spent most of this life wandering—
sometimes toward, sometimes away—

but always dazed and unsure whether
it's ascent or descent, rise or fall.

Whether rolling in a stream
or falling from a summit,

a stone is a stone is a stone
and I've seen these forms before.

My God, my God—
how will I get to you?

Is it a mountain
and my legs are broken?

Is it a boulder
too heavy for my arms?

Either way, it will not be moved.
This stone feels familiar.

Give me life and roll it quietly away.

—*Dave Harrity*