

my heart
shall

sing

an Advent series
about endings
and beginnings

Following the
Revised Common
Lectionary's readings
for Advent Year C
(and a little bit
of the end of Year B)

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Welcome to “My Heart Shall Sing”

The world is always ending somewhere.¹

It’s always beginning somewhere, too...perhaps right in the same place.

This is a truth that thumps like a heartbeat beneath the rhythms of the Advent season. In early November, our lectionary readings begin to speak openly of a world that ends. The lectionary year itself dies a few weeks later, only to begin again on the same topic: endings, and the new beginnings that they create.

Many of our readings over these weeks belong to a scriptural genre called “apocalyptic.” It’s a good word, despite its tendency to evoke the imagery of a cataclysmic Second Coming. That’s not this one word’s fault: “Apocalypse” merely means “revelation.” Much of apocalyptic literature isn’t at all concerned with forecasting a final judgment. Rather, it’s obsessed with telling us the truth about what happens when God reveals Godself: the world as we know it ends.

When God’s nature, God’s truth, God’s will are unveiled, these are the kinds of things that end: power structures that oppress the marginalized; social sins that have gone unchallenged for too long; our untroubled, everyday existences. And because God has drawn near, and Divinity is unveiled, our distance from God ends too.

Apocalypse happens whenever and wherever *what is* dies in order to make room for *what is God*.

What do we do in the face of such revelation, the kind that ends old worlds and begins new ones all around us, every day, wherever God’s reign breaks into our lives?

Scripture offers one particular answer again and again: *we shall sing*.

Moses and Miriam sing on the shores of the Red Sea. Mary bursts into her canticle in front of her cousin Elizabeth’s house. Simeon’s song echoes through the Temple. Paul and Silas’ midnight prison sing-a-long literally brings down the house. When people sing about God’s revelation, the songs reverberate and rumble with dramatic endings and remarkable reversals -- apocalypses everywhere.

So what shall we do in this season, as the texts draw us deeper into revelation, deeper into endings, deeper into the new beginnings ushered in by Christ’s advent?

We shall sing.

¹ Jan Richardson, “[Blessing When the World Is Ending](https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/18/blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/),” *The Painted Prayerbook*. July 18, 2016. <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/18/blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/>

In this series, we look to global Christian songs and hymns to explore the revelations of our lectionary texts. This music brings us closer to the melody of justice sung in those first biblical canticles and arranges those melodies for our modern ears. It harmonizes our ancient texts and our contemporary stories. Each hymn or song offers an Advent proclamation for how we might prepare the way of the Lord.

“God Bless to Us Our Bread” urges: Stake a claim in the world.

“My Lord, What a Morning” asks: Tell of what is, and of what is possible.

“Come Now, O Prince of Peace” pleads: Persist in peace.

“Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning” warns: Mark the time.

“Freedom is Coming” insists: Stand between the already and the not-yet.

“When the Poor Ones” presses: Uproot greed and cultivate compassion.

“The Canticle of the Turning” demands: Rise up.

This is a songbook for our many apocalypses, wherever worldly structures are collapsing in the face of divine imagination: the one that’s whistling in your living room, the one that’s trumpeting in the local school district, the ones that are reverberating a thousand miles away in the lives of people you’ve never met. This is a songbook of a people of faith, a people who believe that the world is turning steadily toward justice. It sings of the hope and grief, the challenge and courage that we need when something dies in order for something else to be born.

Because the world is always ending somewhere—and beginning somewhere, too.



Extended Advent Orientation

This series encourages your community to observe Advent for up to seven weeks this year, though it can certainly be used for a four-week Advent too. Our materials are organized by date to make it easy for you do what works best for your context: whatever Sunday of Advent you're on, and no matter how many you're observing, just use the materials that correspond to the date for that Sunday. Got it? Good.

Now, about that extended Advent...

Maybe you first heard of Advent beginning in early November and lasting for six or seven weeks here at Barn Geese; maybe you've seen the idea kicking around at some of the congregations of your acquaintance these past few years; maybe you've already introduced it to your congregation and are looking for some extra resources. Whatever your situation, let's take a few minutes to explore what an extended Advent is, why congregations might choose to do it, and what we Barn Geese have learned about putting it into practice. You know...just in case your worship and music committee asks.

Why have an extended Advent?

For the Barn Geese, there are two possible alibis for introducing an extended Advent to your congregation: 1) the lectionary and 2) our secular culture.

Alibi 1: "The lectionary made me do it."

While our Advent imagination is often pointed directly at the little baby Jesus in the Bethlehem manger (and don't get us wrong, we love that little baby Jesus), the Advent Revised Common Lectionary texts and prayers make clear that we're remembering Jesus' first coming in order to prepare ourselves for his second arrival - and to train ourselves to recognize where Christ is already showing up in our world.

If you move backward in the calendar from the traditional First Sunday of Advent through November, you'll notice that those lectionary texts are *also* apocalyptic. This is great because they point us toward the Reign of Christ Sunday as a celebration that Christ is coming to reign over all things (spoiler alert: *this is very Advent-y*). Similar themes in the November and December lectionary texts remind us that the lectionary itself is a circle, not a line; we begin the new church year where we ended the old one, waiting for Christ to come again.

An extended Advent can help your congregation see the continuity between the beginning and the end of the liturgical year and nuance their Advent imagery of Christ as both longed-for child and crucified king.

Alibi 2: “I’m an Advent Grinch for Jesus.”

One Barn Goose first explored a seven-week Advent with her congregation because the people enjoyed decorating their sanctuary for Christmas together at the end of November. Every year, it was a joyful tradition of fellowship and prayer. However, the proliferation of decorations meant that Advent didn’t feel like Advent as much as it felt like an extended Christmas, and the congregation didn’t get the opportunity to engage with the spiritual gifts of Advent: waiting, mindfulness, repentance, reorientation.

We have the full backing of our secular culture when we slip into Christmas early. None of us are surprised when the stores bust out their Christmas decorations the moment Halloween is over or when the carols play on the radio on the day after Thanksgiving. Clergy often face an uphill battle to keep the Chrismons in their tissue paper and the carols in the Christmas section of the hymnal until the appropriate time, and playing the Advent Grinch is hardly conducive to our own spiritual welfare. In some contexts, the Advent Grinch is not the best pastoral approach anyway: sometimes, people just need a little early Christmas joy.

Our Barn Goose introduced her congregation to an extended Advent in order to preserve the beloved congregational tradition of decorating the sanctuary at the end of November while teaching the congregation to experience the gift of Advent waiting. Another Barn Goose followed suit with her own congregation a few years later. Yet another Goose brought the themes of a seven-week Advent to her church while still doing a regular ol’ four-week Advent. Together, we Barn Geese have found that even if our congregations are not ready to try an extended Advent, its themes can provide a sense of continuity from November to December, particularly with complementary liturgical practices to link the Sundays following All Saints to the Sundays of Advent.

TLDR: you can do an extended Advent no matter how many candles are on your Advent wreath. Your congregation will benefit from your attention to the themes of waiting, revealing, and preparation already present in the lectionary.

Where does the extended Advent come from?

The North American Academy of Liturgy began promoting an extended Advent a few years ago (“The Advent Project”), reminding us that a longer Advent predates the tradition of a four-week Advent.

In the early centuries of the church, the length of Advent varied; sometimes it was three weeks, sometimes six or seven, sometimes forty days. The forty-day tradition intentionally positioned Advent as a corollary of the Lenten season. (Most of our Orthodox siblings still observe a 40-day period of fasting before Christmas). The longer Advent was sometimes called "St. Martin's Lent" because it begins with St. Martin's feast day, which generally falls one week after All Saints.

Therefore, a modern extended Advent begins with the Sunday immediately following All Saints.

What does the timing look like for this year?

In 2021, many mainline Protestant congregations will observe All Saints on Sunday, October 31. However, Lutherans are probably going to be doing Reformation Day, 504 years to the day after Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg church door. Lutherans will probably transfer All Saints to November 7 this year.

If you're Lutheran and planning on doing an extended Advent in 2021, it will probably begin on November 14, and it will be six weeks long. Everyone else's extended Advent would begin on November 7 and last seven weeks.

(The extended Advent calendar is not usually this complicated. Thanks, 2021.)

What about Christ the King/Reign of Christ?

We recommend observing it on November 21 as usual. It's been our experience that an extended Advent season lends a new and rich context to the Reign of Christ, which already contains themes consonant with Advent.

What could an extended Advent look/feel like?

If seven-week Advent is a mirror of Lent, and if we want to lean into the themes of longing and waiting while building toward Christmas, it makes sense to begin the season with a stripped-down sanctuary. Try using blue paraments only. Put away extra candleholders and banners. Use only what is essential. The challenge of walking through Advent darkness and winter cold helps us connect to what is really important, to the essentials of our faith: font, communion table, the word.

Here are some things we've tried:

- ❖ Beginning the service with silence, followed by singing a verse of a hymn on the theme of waiting or re-centering. (Barn Goose Emily has

used the first verse of the hymn “Come and Find the Quiet Center” in this way, and Victoria’s tried it too. Both found it very effective.)

- ❖ Practicing intentional silence in place of other liturgical elements, like the creed.
- ❖ Reading poetry about different kinds of waiting.
- ❖ Simplifying the order of service.
- ❖ Putting out blue paraments early.
- ❖ Adjusting the Advent wreath practice to reflect the extension of the season. We have ideas about how to do that in the very next article.

Feedback from the field

We have positive takeaways from our experiences introducing congregations to an extended Advent. Some worshipers struggled with the change, and others deeply enjoyed it. One congregation went so far as to do a survey after their experiment with an extended Advent, and responses evenly ran the gamut from “I loved it!” to “I hated it” with most people falling somewhere in the middle ground.

In our congregations, we offered plenty of communication and teaching around the extended Advent to help ease the transition. Of course, this strategy suffered from the same weakness built into all church communications, which is that *people need to read the bulletin/newsletter/email/listen to the announcements* in order to get the memo. Most of the negative feedback we received after the season centered on people feeling caught by surprise by the practice. The takeaway: communicate early and often, and expect that there will inevitably be some people who are surprised.

One Barn Goose will cherish the memory of a conversation that happened the year after her congregation tried an extended Advent. Her church had decided to revert to a four-week season because they were going through a period of instability and thought the traditional timeline would feel grounding. This Goose was in a committee meeting when the chair asked, “Are we doing seven-week Advent again this year?” When our Goose responded in the negative, his face fell. “Oh,” he said. “I really loved all the candles. Maybe I’ll do it again on my own this year.”

May there be such people with delightful openness to this new-old practice in your congregations, too.



Adapting the Advent Wreath

The most immediate challenge of an extended Advent is **how to count the weeks**. The average Advent wreath can accommodate four candles. Also, the average Advent wreath was donated in memory of someone, and switching to something completely different might be tricky. Here are a few Advent candle options, with or without the existing wreath.

Option 1: Keep the wreath and give it company.

Adding three extra candles somewhere near your existing wreath might be your least disruptive option. At one of her congregations, Barn Goose Linnéa set a little credence table in front of the wreath and covered it in dark blue fabric and dark blue glitter tulle (one of her favorite things!). She placed three pillar candles of varying heights on the table and started lighting them from shorter to taller. Week 4, the “real” beginning of Advent, was the first Sunday she lit a candle on the actual Advent wreath. The light traveled upward toward the wreath as the weeks progressed, and the existing wreath still worked like it usually did.

Option 2: Stick extra candles on your wreath.

This is what Barn Goose Victoria’s church did during its foray into a seven-week Advent. They had a circular wreath with a clear acrylic bottom, which allowed them to add three candle-holders that had been spray-painted to match the brass of the stand. Poster putty lent some stability to these three central candles (though not enough, in Victoria’s opinion, as she relives the terror of watching acolytes light them). Evergreens hid the fact that the design of the candleholders didn’t match the rest of the wreath. If Victoria had it to do over again, she’d recommend that the worship and music committee consider a different option; instability of the candles aside, as December advanced, it became hard to distinguish individual candles from one another, and the visual impact of counting candles was lost. Your mileage may vary.

Option 3: Make the wreath set-up part of your Advent counting.

Instead of adding extra candles, use the extra two or three weeks at the beginning of extended Advent to build your wreath. Begin assembling elements of the wreath itself ahead of time: the stand, the ring, and the candles themselves can all be part of an extended Advent observation. Note: the Advent candle-lighting prayer we wrote for you uses lighted candles as a primary image, so it won’t work with this method—but you may find the trade-off of a gentler visual introduction worthwhile.

Option 4: Ditch the wreath and use something else.

Many candelabras built for churches have seven candle holders. If you have one hanging out in your sanctuary or storage closet, use it in place of an Advent wreath, apply some evergreen garland, and light a candle each week. If you don’t have such a

The widow who gives her last two coins to the temple treasury has been the cornerstone of many a congregational stewardship campaign. "See how generous that poor widow was?" we tell each other. "We should be that generous, too." We make her poverty a virtue in itself, missing the anger in Jesus' voice as he watches her make the payment that will leave her hungry.

Don't mistake the words and Argentine traditional tune of "God Bless to Us Our Bread" for sentimentality or simplicity, either. This version of the Latin American Bread Prayer, arranged by John Bell, was originally published in a collection of hymns called *Love and Anger*, which connected biblical themes of justice with traditions of protest music and poetry around the world. The text of the Latin American Bread Prayer -- usually a version of "to all those with bread give a hunger for justice, and to all those who hunger give bread" -- emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as the liberation theology of Central and South America became more widely known in North America. It expands the petition of the Lord's Prayer about daily bread to address issues of hunger and justice. In the prayer, the poor need more than charity: they need bread, real changes that will improve real lives. Significantly, the rich are also in need of prayer. They need God to kindle their hunger for justice so that the poor will be more than the recipients of their philanthropy.

Wealthier people and powerful nations have long sentimentalized poverty as a virtue and the poor as innocent, simple objects of well-intentioned but misplaced charity. Institutions as small as congregations and as large as governments often find it easier to choose what is good for their poorer neighbors rather than consulting them first, only to be frustrated when canned goods too heavy for a long walk home or unsuited for a family's health needs are abandoned on the curb by the food pantry. This is one moment when we need to sing the bread prayer, that God will make us hungry for true justice instead of cheap charity.

Bulletin version: As Jesus observes the temple treasury with his disciples, only a few days before his death, he sees the widow lose her financial security, and he is angry. This is the world he came to turn upside down. As we sing "God Bless to Us Our Bread," we pray for God's power to stir in the space where the hunger for food and the hunger for justice meet. We pray for our bread to make us hungry.



Preachers' Notes

November 7: "Latin American Bread Prayer"

by the Rev. Emily Trubey-Weller

The widow walked into church carrying a paper box full of pantry staples and dragging a huge bag of clothing. She brought them for a family that had hit hard times when a fire closed down one parent's place of employment. This immigrant family was working off-the-books, and though job opportunities were plentiful, they were unreliable and low-paying.

She remembered when the war in Germany had closed her father's business, cut family ties, and pushed them out of the city where they lived to sleep in a farmer's barn. She remembered that at times their only source of sustenance had been potatoes that the farmer's wife roasted by the basketful in a huge fire, and then gave without hesitation to any who asked. She remembered the compassion of the wealthy family in New York City they'd met after they immigrated. They had employed her whole family: her father as their driver, her mother as their maid, eventually paying her to work alongside her mom. They'd helped her and her siblings with homework. They'd bought them gifts. They'd given her family a home and stable income, and they'd been kind.

By adulthood, the widow owned her own business. She always tried to employ immigrants, and she paid them well. She strove to show kindness to the families of her employees: providing free childcare and tutoring for the kids, sending them home from work with pans of homemade food, finding furnishings for their homes to help them settle in.

Perhaps it's excessive to throw this third widow into the mix on a Sunday when we have two other widows to read about, but I can't help but think of her story when I read theirs.

This week, the lectionary readings invite us to step into apocalypse. Whether you're planning a seven-, six-, or four-week Advent season, today the texts pivot to remind us: it's the beginning of the end.

Fellow Barn Goose Linnéa Clark reflected on the apocalyptic tone of this week's lessons like this: "Sometimes the world doesn't end with a bang. It ends quietly, with the whisper of flour and drip of oil...[or] with the soft sound of two little coins in a full treasury." My widow friend with the box of food and the garbage bag of clothing just wanted to make sure it didn't end today. At least for one family.

The revelatory apocalypse of Advent is happening all around us. Everywhere, worlds are ending in the quiet way the widow of Zarephath's might have. The end is near -- perpetually -- for so many.

*O God, to those who have hunger, give bread,
and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice.*

Of course we know that justice is bigger than one widow and her son, or one immigrant family. Some of my loved ones would be quick to remind me that acts of charity can perpetuate injustice, allowing broken systems to look as if they are functioning for the good of all when in reality they only serve those who already have full bellies. When Jesus points out the widow offering her last two coins, he's disrupting the norms and expectations of his own unjust society by commending her while condemning the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Our own society needs such calling-out, too. Pointing out such injustice and working to end it follows Jesus' own example. The ancient song of scripture thrums with praise for the Almighty's ability to topple unjust systems and sings out the invitation for us to join in such work.

Yet so often we feel overwhelmed by that call: *What I can do isn't enough....*
Could smaller acts -- a box of food, free childcare, sharing a fire-roasted potato or a bit of flour -- be acts of apocalyptic hope? *...or is it?*

What if such small things are a cheeky and defiant way to bring hope into a world that has never been free of injustice? *Not this family. Not this widow. Not today, powers of darkness. You can't have them.*

What if we could connect, not only our own experiences of hunger, but also our experiences of fullness, to the hunger of others? *I have more than I need. Who doesn't have enough?*

What if it's the small acts, taken throughout our lives, that keep us from becoming jaded, bitter, or despondent? *What if it's the small acts that keep us hungry for justice?*

What I can do isn't enough... or is it?

When the widow put two coins in the treasury, it was a small act. She didn't shut down a whole system of injustice. She didn't overtly confront the hypocrisy of the leaders. But it did defy a system that told her she couldn't give enough, couldn't be enough, wasn't worth enough.

When the widow of Zarephath shared flour and oil with the prophet Elijah, it was a small act. She didn't save everyone from the famine. She didn't bring rain down to water the crops. She didn't eliminate all the pressures of an unjust socio-economic

system. But she did make a bold play for life even as she looked down the chasm of death.



Advent Candle-Lighting & Prayers of the Day

By the Rev. Justin Kosec

Prayers of the Day written by the Revs. Justin Kosec, Victoria Larson, Kathryn Pocalyko, and Emily Trubey-Weller.

A note on the rite

In this Rite for the Advent Wreath, the candle flame represents the goodness and new life God brings to the human experience. The candles mark the places or people or days that await this goodness. The balance between those candles that are lit and those unlit remind us that God's work in this world remains incomplete, even as it visibly breaks into our world. How might the structure of your Advent wreath--the shape or color of its candles; the housing in which the wreath sits; or the accoutrements around the wreath--help convey this meaning?

The Rite

A verse of the song of the day is sung.

Each week
as we approach the Advent
of our Savior Jesus Christ
on Christmas,
we acknowledge what God's people
have always known:
Even when God is active in this world,
hope is a work in progress.

Each candle on our wreath
represents a person
or a place
or a moment in time
that still awaits God's goodness.

Yet we are witnesses to God's work in this world.
Just as a small spark
can give new life to a dead wick,
we believe
the fire of God's presence
can ignite God's purpose in this place.

God, through your love,
**a familiar light
can banish the fear of the other;**

Through your love,
**the warmth of good cheer
can extinguish cold-hearted injustice.**

Through your love,
**the song of faith
can rekindle hope for the hopeless.**

We light this candle
as a small act of our great anticipation.

The candle is lit.

*As the candle is lit:
someone reads ONE VERSE of the day's hymn;
OR prays the Prayer of the Day:*

November 7:
God of all who hunger,
feed all who need food today.
And whether what I have to offer
is two coins,
or a full meal,
or a little time,
or a full-time job,
help me to offer it willingly,

and with hope!
That no matter how small the act,
it might bring a bit of your justice,
and keep me hungry for more.

Amen.

*Following the reading of the VERSE or PRAYER,
the congregation is exhorted
as follows:*

Week one:

This is the first candle.
A sign that God's goodness
still burns brightly
even when it seems fragile, temporary,
easily extinguished.

Many candles yet remain.
Each reminding us
that God's healing
has not yet fully spread
throughout the earth.
How long must this world wait
to see God's glory?

You are God's people,
called to serve this world
and to let your light shine.
Let the fire of justice burn in your heart,
for the dead still cry
for the flicker of new life we carry.

Additionally, the rite may be concluded by singing a verse from the song of the day.



Eucharistic Prayer B

A note on the rite:

This shorter Thanksgiving riff on Mary's Magnificat. It is particularly appropriate for December 19th, but can be used at any time in the Advent season.

The Rite:

DIALOG

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts!

We lift them to the Lord!

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

PREFACE

It is right, our duty and our delight
to give thanks and praise to you, Lord God,
through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son,
whom the angel announced,
whom Mary embraced,
whose impossibility you made possible.
And so, with prophets old and new,
with shining stars and leaping seas,
with heavenly hosts armed with adoration,
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

The congregation sings or says the Sanctus.

THANKSGIVING

Mighty One, you have done great things for us, and holy is your name!
From generation to generation, you have shown mercy to those who call on you.
The strength of your arm has scattered the proud and cast down kings.
The opening of your hand has filled the hungry with bread and with justice.
In the fullness of time, you kept the promise you made to our ancestors,
giving to us your own Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them to drink saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

United at this table, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts, O God,
And send her into and through this gathered people,
that, fed and strengthened with this holy food,
we may magnify your presence in our world,
until Christ comes again in glory.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

We await his advent, O God,
with all the saints of every time and place.
Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
All honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever.

Amen.



How to Cite our Materials

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In this first year of operation, we've made our materials *free* to use, and we're committed to keeping our stuff affordable as we move forward, no matter your congregation's size or worship budget.

That said, "My Heart Shall Sing" is the most comprehensive series we've designed so far, and your financial support will go a long way toward making sure we can continue to prepare series of this caliber in the future. Please visit www.barngeeseworship.com/contribute to make a gift in support of our ministry.

Thank you.



