

“Competing Cultures of Advent”

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DBU Advent Chapel

December 8, 2008

I have become convinced that we live **in a society and culture of advent**. That is, we live in a culture and society of hope, of expectation, of anticipation, of looking and longing for someone or something new that will make some kind of significant change, some major alteration in the way things are. We can see this advent hope even in the world of automobiles and politics.

For example, in the words of one commercial: The all-new Toyota Tundra. The truck that’s changing it all. Or take note of Barak Obama’s central campaign slogan: The Change we need, the change we can believe in.

Everybody’s hoping, waiting, getting excited about, getting ready for **the next big thing**. With these words and rock stars (or celebrities) in mind, Vince Gill sings these words in his song “Next Big Thing” –

Big cigars, diamond rings
Ridin' all around in a limousine
When you finally hit the top
Man you know what that means
Everybody's ready/waiting for the next big thing.

Our culture is an advent culture, and we are advent people — a culture and a people of hope, expectation, and anticipation that someone or something is coming to help and to save us.

Whoever it is, or whatever it is, will provide us with the new and improved social, cultural, political and economic conditions so desperately need and long for. End the war in Iraq; provide an economic turn around; create jobs; stop foreclosures; end racism, and so on. Whoever it is or whatever it is will also provide the personal happiness, peace, and fulfillment we have desired so desperately and for so long.

So what about you? How would you fill in the blank:

I can hardly wait for _____.

1. For the semester to end and the holidays to begin.

2. For school to be over, to graduate, get a job, and start making some money
3. For him to come along; for her to come along.
4. For your parents to stop fighting, or get back together
5. For a wedding day; for kids; for a family
6. For the new app for your iPhone; ... or for an iPhone.
7. For that new song to download to your iPod; ... or for an iPod.
8. Or whatever

And it's no wonder that we all seem to be looking forward to, looking ahead, and waiting, hoping and expecting for a better world and a better life to come. After all, our lives are often miserable personally, and we know the world seems like a total mess.

How regularly and vividly we are exposed through the media to the devastations wrought in the earth and in human lives by tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wars, genocides, terrorism, savagery, rape, abortion, murder, divorce, greed, lies, hatred, ambition, violence, robbery, sacrilege, lust, promiscuity, indecency, fornication, adultery, incest, pornography, drug addiction, alcoholism, AIDS, and so on.

And even a part from how such things may impact us personally, often times we just simply find ourselves empty on the inside, hurting, alone, bent, and broken. The streets, and even this campus, are filled with broken hearts.

With such overwhelming awareness of the trouble in our world; with such pain and misery on the inside, you would think that the smartest thing to do would be to just give up hope and collapse into cynicism and despair. In fact many of us do. For some, the 9th, additional beatitude is said to be: "Blessed are those who refuse to hope, for they will not be disappointed."

And yet there seems to be a natural spirit, even a God-given spirit of advent, of hope and expectation, in human hearts and in human nature. And in so far as this God given spirit of advent exists in human hearts and human nature, such advent hopes and expectations are bound to show up, as they do,

in human society and in human culture. “Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” as Alexander Pope said in Epistle One of his *Essay on Man*.

In short, we human beings are advent beings and human culture is an advent culture, always in search of a forthcoming gospel, of some good news that will bring about fresh beginnings and a restoration of life.

However, the kind of advent expectation that characterizes non-Christian culture is considerably different in character than the advent season and expectations of the Church. In contrast to the grand biblical story with its promise and fulfillment of a coming Messiah and Savior who will redeem humanity and all creation from the tragic consequences of sin, death, and Satan, our secularized culture, *which is no less religious in character*, offers its own unique promises of redemption and finds them fulfilled in other kinds of messiahs and saviors and other kinds of salvation. Our surrounding culture and society, as an advent culture and society, in other words, offers its own stories of hope, expectation, and redemption.

Perhaps it will be found in a particular product, or in a particular person, or in a particular politician, or in a particular place. Or perhaps in me! Or in you!

Or perhaps reason science will be our savior since they seems to be omniscient or all knowing; or *technology* which is said to be virtually omnipotent or all-powerful with all its magical gadgetry; or in a new and improved *economy* which can bestow its monied wealth and goodness upon us all.

When all these hopes and expectations are added together, they will create for us a better world, maybe even a perfect world, a utopia that will overcome evil and injustice, give us life, liberty and happiness, and, indeed, make all things new! This is our secularized advent hope. Help is on the way. Things are going to get better. It’s going to be all right.

Apparently, however, we have not learned our lessons from history, for in truth, what is taking place before our very eyes is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 ... revisited.

In the past 500 years or so, especially in the West, we have reconstructed a similar “Babelesque” or Babel-like culture out of our own ingenuity and for our own good and glory. We have replaced our need for and hope in God with a faith and hope in ourselves, in people, places and things, and in what our reason, science, technology and economy can accomplish. Though it has recently undergone a stringent postmodern critique, our modern culture with its advent expectations has survived this critique, and is alive and well. Today, our monolithic contemporary culture nurtures and guides the hopes and dreams of most people here in the United States, and not just here but also for people around the world.

Without doubt, this includes the hopes and dreams of many, many Christians as well, ourselves included. We believers are *not immune* to the overwhelming influence of our surrounding culture and its own version of advent. Again, fill in the blank: I can hardly wait for: _____ . What is the source for your answer to this question? Even though we are church-goers and believe in the Bible, if we are honest with ourselves for just a moment, we will recognize that we base our hope for the future on what people, places and things and our scientific, technological, and economic gods have to offer us, especially in terms of knowledge, power, and prosperity.

So what I am saying is this, ***that there are two competing advent cultures with two competing versions regarding our hopes and expectations for the future — the world’s and the church’s — and I can’t help but wonder which one has really taken hold of our imaginations and has more real practical power in our daily lives.***

Is it Christ and his kingdom that is really at hand for you and for me? Or is it the advent expectations of contemporary culture that first place in our hearts, minds, bodies, and lives? On candid days, I am pretty sure that it is our culture’s hopes and expectations, not the coming of Christ and his kingdom, that make up our advent desires and dreams.

- ❖ If so, even without knowing it, we have been *stained by the world*, which is contrary to true religion according to the James 1: 27.
- ❖ If so, we have failed *to guard ourselves from the nemesis of idols*, about which the Apostle John warns us in the last verse of his first epistle (5: 21).
- ❖ If so, the sin of *hypocrisy* has been crouching at our doors, and may have already mastered us.

In hopes, then, of removing the stain of worldliness from our hearts so that we may return to true religion, in an attempt to repent of our idolatry so that we may worship the one true God once again, with the goal of weeding out the hypocrisy in our lives, we need to recognize this cultural competition over advent expectations, both the world's and the church's.

We need to examine ourselves carefully to see where we stand, and if necessary, repent.

- ❖ Whose story is informing our lives?
- ❖ Which narrative is guiding our daily living?
- ❖ Who gets to narrate your world?

There is no better time than the season of Advent, than *this* season of Advent 2008 — of recalling and expecting the coming of Jesus Christ — to examine the true advent hopes of our hearts and minds and ways of life.

To do this, we must remind ourselves of the world's true story, indeed, of our true story, found in the Word of God, and what it teaches us about the character of our hopes and expectations as the people of God. The English poet William Cowper helps to launch a review of the biblical story with these wonderful lines in his poem *Tirocinium*,

“Lisping our syllables, we scramble next
Through moral narrative, or sacred text;
And learn with wonder how this world began,
Who made, who marr'd, and who has ransom'd man.”

For, indeed, as the moral narrative and sacred text of Scripture reveals, in the beginning, God made a wonderful world of *shalom* to be His very image and likeness.

Yet, we marr'd what God made. We chose the pathway of revolt and declared our independence from God. Our sin broke everything, ourselves included. This was a great tragedy, an enormous catastrophe. As John Milton writes in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*

... man's disobedience and the fruit /
of that forbidden tree ... /
brought death into the world, and all our woe.

Because of this dreadful fall and its devastating consequences, we can readily understand why the human race has been in an advent mode ever since — hoping, longing, expecting, anticipating that we would find a way out of our all our trials and tribulations and return to a better life. However, from the time of the fall up until now, we have only built Babels, and sought a salvation rooted exclusively in own resources and for our own glory apart from God.

Despite our rebellion, what is most interesting is that from the time of the fall,
in an advent mode

e Lord and Savior, Jesus

Christ. From **Isaiah 9: 6-7**, we read this promise:

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness”

And as we also read these great promises of God for redemption from Isaiah 11: 1-2.

1Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

2The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ISAIAH 11: 1-2

On the basis of these promises, we can say with John Milton, “Far off his coming shone!” (*Paradise Lost*, 6. 768). If there are other promises — and there are many — they could be summed up in the words of the beloved advent carol, the 12th century Latin Hymn, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

O come, O come, Emmanuel□
And ransom captive Israel□
That mourns in lonely exile here□
Until the Son of God appear□
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel□ Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Of course, in the fullness of time, God fulfilled His great advent promises and sent the long expected Jesus -- Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ. Christ was born of woman, and that woman’s name was Mary. She was the recipient of the announcement of his birth made by the Angel Gabriel; Mary is the one whom all generations now rightly call blessed. Christ, as promised, was the offspring of Abraham, and the true Israel, the one to whom all the promises were made, the one in whom they are all fulfilled. Christ was also the lion of the tribe of Judah, and the son of David, the one who holds the scepter in his hand, and whose kingdom has no end.

Now he sits on his Davidic throne triumphant, and with the eye of faith, we see him as the almighty Ruler of the total cosmos, the Lord with all authority over heaven and earth. One day, He will come again a second time, not as a suffering lamb, but as a roaring as a lion. And all his enemies will be made as a footstool for his feet.

When he does come again, He will complete his great work of redemption, judging the nations and raising the dead. He will transform His creation, *which was subjected to a seemingly endless winter because of our sin*, into an everlasting Christmas, where all things are made new and in which perfect peace, love and joy dwell forever.

Undoubtedly, then, we live in an advent culture. Our culture gets it right in its longing and hoping and yearning for some kind of salvation. Our culture can't help but recognize how desperately we need help and a solution to our many, many problems.

But our culture gets it wrong in *what* it longs for, in *how* it hopes, and in *what* it expects to happen in the future. We hope unintelligently, foolishly, and unrealistically ... thoroughly deceived.

But there is a true counter-culture of advent rooted in God, revealed in Scripture, and observed by the Church. It is found in hoping, and yearning, and longing for Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. He is the Immanuel, the One who makes life truly happy, truly healthy, and truly whole.

He is the one who puts everything else in its proper, unexaggerated place, including ourselves, other people, things and places; He enables us to rightly esteem and use our science, our technology, and our money, which we don't reject, but see as relative goods and the gifts of God, but certainly not as the absolute goods or the saviors of our lives.

So, there are competing cultures of advent, the world's and the church's. So I ask myself: which is really mine? Which, might I ask, is really yours?

“Lisping our syllables, we scramble next
Through moral narrative, or sacred text;
And learn with wonder how this world began,
Who made, who marr'd, and who has ransom'd man.”

Christ created. Christ was promised. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ is coming again. This, I would submit to you, constitutes the true advent. It should be what we can hardly wait for!

As we conclude, please join me in saying the **Lord's prayer** together, using the word "trespasses."