

WHY WE COME

In a mild way, I have set up a contrast between the “how” and the “why” of Advent. The “how” and “why” seem fascinating to me, no matter what the project. Both are critical in any human enterprise. Method and motivation tell the story. There is a third factor equally critical (timing), but no time to talk about that this year. One of the keys to understanding life is learning to notice how the method and the motive are getting along with each other. If I want a really peaceful home and think I’ll beat the wife and kids into submission to get it, there’s going to be a problem between motive and method. And if I just back away from all the conflicts and issues and try to stay peaceful myself, there’s still going to be a problem between motive and method.

Frequently, we cannot find a method to match our motive. At least we think we cannot. Method is all mixed up with practical realities, as we perceive them. Motive has to do with what we think would be wonderful, desirable. Method has to be possible. What can we actually *do* to move toward the desirable goal?

It’s an endless plot being worked out in every village, family, business, and nation throughout the world. In nearly every community, there are churches prospering and churches dwindling toward complete ineffectiveness. Those prospering often have very different theologies and approaches. Some that prosper seem to suddenly turn a corner and go downhill. We always have a list of excuses and explanations for this, yet there are always other churches in the same community that belie those explanations. The truth is, they run out of motive – Jesus is no longer important enough to the people. Either that or the motive and the method turn out not to match each other.

Every individual can sit down in a quiet moment and ask, “What is my motive and what is my method?” If the two match, we have a highly effective person regardless of the motive. If the two do not match, there is too much stress and confusion for much forward progress, no matter how good the purpose.

What about the motive and methods of Christmas?

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MOTIVE: To honor and celebrate the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, the incredible love of God becoming manifest in our world, at least in the hearts of those willing to receive it. That is motive. What is method?

METHOD: Buy presents, shop 'til you drop, get frantic, fill your calendars chock-full, go into debt. Does method match motive?

SECOND APPROACH: Stay aloof, get no presents for anybody, do no decorating, never smile, be ready to give speeches on how stupid it all is at every opportunity. Does that method match any better?

It doesn't take much to shift us from celebrating LOVE to complaining about all that is imperfect. It doesn't take much to shift us from celebrating God's LOVE to trying to buy love, earn love, impress friends, "make" the children happy (now there's a phrase for you). If we are not very careful, something will split the motive from the method when we aren't even looking. Then this season which should be so full of peace, returning, acknowledging, expressing joy ... will be turned into a frantic race of frustration and frenzy, or a bitter cry of cynicism and blame. But it doesn't have to happen this way. Lots of us are catching on to that more every year. But I, for one, have to stay conscious and awake and keep on my guard, or I am back into it like a shot.

Advent and Christmas are so beautiful – so full of the joy and hope which make life worth living – that I never again want to let it be dragged off into a secular, mindless feeding-frenzy. I am equally sad that, for so many, it has become a "reverse hope." It reminds them of all that is missing in their lives, instead of being a great invitation. They see what is lacking instead of what is being offered.

Some of you may not track what I'm about to say, and that's okay; I don't mean it to sound heavy. If it doesn't click inside, let it flow on by. Some of the problem with many Christmas celebrations is that we have made them more and more for the children. Christmas really is not for children, you know. Over the last two thousand years, the focus on the children has come in the last two hundred years. At first, this may have been a wonderful addition. But increasingly, the celebrations have become child-driven. Never mind the Incarnation; what will please or interest the children? I know it sounds old-fashioned, but children grow up by emulating the adults around them. If there are no adults to emulate, they still grow, but not "up."

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If we design our Christmas celebrations to please the kids, we rob them of Christmas. It is no longer about God coming to earth in a special way; it is about trying to please them, and they will sense and know this. They are not stupid. But they *are* too young to handle the poison of too much self-centeredness. If you love Christmas for real – if you celebrate it yourself for the love and power it truly represents – then your children will feel it and be drawn to it, though not in every moment that you may wish it or want it. Keep drawing your children *toward* Christmas, rather than trying to *use* Christmas to please them or “make” them happy, or to prove that you love them. The real Christmas – not our celebrations – has the power to transform any who touch it, any who open to it, any who will receive it. I hope that is what we want most for ourselves and for our children. Sometimes we have to trust Jesus – get out of the way a little – even with Christmas.

Most of us come to Advent – come looking for God – with more than one motive, just like in the real story: Some wanted healing, some wanted fame, some wanted to get rid of Roman oppression, some wanted a Messiah to fix all the things that were wrong with the world so they wouldn't have problems anymore. Some hungered for truth, others wanted to debate the Scriptures, others were mostly interested in keeping whatever privileges and influence they already had. I don't think it's hard to identify with any of these motives today. I think we still come with many of them, and even mixtures of all of them. I think it is important to know that, to see it clearly, and to start laying them all down. At least I know it is important for me. Come, Lord Jesus. Let all the rest fade into the background.

But before we get too specific, remember that Advent is a promise, and Christmas is the fulfillment of the promise. I am talking about the psychological impact of Advent and Christmas on all of us who claim this tradition. Advent is the promise of everything we want, even if we don't know yet what that is. Christmas symbolizes the fulfillment of everything we have ever dreamed of, even if we have not dreamed of it yet. Do you recognize what I am saying? Advent and Christmas symbolize the promise and the fulfillment of all our hopes and aspirations. That is why it is such a powerful and volatile affair.

When we talk about Christmas in our society, for most people we are not just talking about Jesus – not unless Jesus is for them the fulfillment of all their hopes and aspirations. But Jesus or no Jesus,

for most people in our culture, Christmas symbolizes all the hope they have left of realizing their highest and dearest aspirations – even, I remind you, if these are vague and misty. Who hates Christmas? (I'm not talking about people who disagree with its religious context or theological significance. They don't hate it; they just don't participate.) Who hates Christmas? The cynic. The pessimist. The discouraged. The disillusioned. Anybody who has given up hope, given up aspirations – who has decided to settle for life as it is, and I mean without hoping or trying for any improvement in themselves, in others, or in any of the organizations and institutions around them. These are the ones who *hate* Christmas. The symbol and proclamation of hope are fire to the hopeless. For those who have given up hope, the claim of hope and the call to hope are so irritating and annoying that they cannot stand it. They have put their souls to sleep, and Christmas keeps trying to wake them up again. If it succeeds, they know it will cost them irresolvable anguish. So this greatest symbol of hope is infuriating to them. Consciously, they think that people who fool with Christmas are unbearably stupid and naive. (Have you ever watched a cynical, disillusioned spouse married to a Pollyanna, sentimental-Christmas spouse? It is one of the great deservings.)

Advent and Christmas symbolize the promise and fulfillment of our highest hopes and aspirations. And if we are not merely part of this society but are also Christians, then this hope is specifically linked with the coming of Jesus: a spiritual Leader who invites us to live in a Kingdom not of this world, yet beginning right now – a spiritual Leader who is present with us as Holy Spirit, even now. The hopes and the aspirations are about this unseen Kingdom, and are intertwined with the relationship we have with this unseen but very present King. We live in the physical world, trying to honor and show our allegiance to our unseen King. That does not mean we ever win here, or that if we do, it matters greatly. It also means that nothing that goes on here can ultimately destroy our hope or separate us from our King. Advent and Christmas are an ever-renewed and renewing acceptance of the invitation to live in a new and different way because we recognize this unseen King and His Kingdom.

The little boy came to the Sunday dinner table with dirty hands, as usual. As usual, he was asked to show his hands and, failing inspection, was instructed to go wash them. As usual, he protested, and as usual, he was reminded that dirty hands were not appropriate at meal time,

and why. As he went down the hall toward the washroom, he was heard to mutter: “Germs and Jesus. Germs and Jesus. That’s all I ever hear, and you can’t see either one of them.”

It is unnerving to dedicate more and more of life to things unseen ... until we remember that everything we have valued and cared about most – all of our lives – has always been unseen: love, friendship, truth, righteousness, Spirit, integrity, meaning, purpose, God. They have called to us since long before we knew their source or had any language by which to speak of them. Though unseen, they still manifest in ways powerful and dramatic in our physical world, but the “things themselves” are not visible to the naked eye. We live for them anyway. Life would not be worth living without them. Jesus merely brings it into focus, reaffirms it, raises it to a higher dimension.

Why do we come? We get weary, lost, and broken in this world. We come because we cannot find the way alone; because we cannot heal or forgive ourselves well enough to survive; because on our own and by ourselves, there is no hope worth having. And this One loves us, forgives us, heals us, invites us. So we respond. We come out of the negatives of life – out of the negatives of our own evil and pride and failure – whether they show on the outside, or because we can no longer stand them on the inside. We want our motives to be better, and they are not; we want our lives to be purer, and they are not. We want sometime, somehow, to love somebody just because it wells up from within, and not just because we are supposed to, or because they need it, or because it will work better, or because we will get something from it. So we come to the Lord of Life ... because we are not the lords of life.

There is another reason why we come. It is all bound up with the first reason, like walking takes both legs. Just so with the negative and positive motives by which we come to Christ.

If we say that the evil drives us to Jesus, we can also say that Jesus is light in the darkness. If we say that we are lost, proud, defeated, or lonely, we can also say that His love is pure and boundless, and we cannot help but want to move toward Him. If we say that there is darkness and evil within us, we can also say that the soul within us loves light, and that always, for as far back as we can remember, we have wanted to be good and to do good, and we have wanted a “higher,” better life. We have felt the tug of a great power drawing us toward light.

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In fact, if the light within had not been so strong, we would never have been so badly devastated when we got sidetracked or failed to live by the light.

So we come to Advent and Christmas because our souls sense what is in Jesus and behind Jesus. We are drawn to it with a power that surprises us. It is so strong that we literally fear what it might do to our sense of reality, and we constantly try to dilute the power and protect ourselves from ... what do we call it? Going off the deep end? Getting too religious? Yes indeed! It is a fear few people can identify with any real clarity: the fear that the soul within will kick over the traces and go for what it really loves and cares about. How terrifying!

So we also come to Advent and Christmas because what Jesus says and does is so beautiful and authentic – and what He calls us to is more important and compelling than all the other games and goals that are being played out on this earth. We want to be part of Him, we want to respond, we want to know and love Him. That is also why we come.

Jesus replied: *“Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”* Why does that make me want to cry – beyond all intellect, beyond all theology, beyond all reason or common sense? It is so poignant and appealing that I immediately start to ward it off. The mere suggestion of it catches in my throat and heart with a longing I can hardly bear. And yet it is as familiar as the Gospel which keeps offering it, as familiar as the Bible which keeps proclaiming it, as familiar as the communion meal which invites us into it. Shall we not come?