



# A WINDOW ON ADVENT

PBCC Window

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Christmas is twelve days away, and advancing too quickly for some, too slowly for others. But we are not there yet; we are in the season of Advent, a period which offers the opportunity to reflect upon the big picture of God's coming in Christ. God promised Israel that he would come to save his people. He came in the person of his Son, Jesus the Messiah, who is Immanuel, God with Us. And this same Jesus has promised that he will come again.

This year the women have been tracing the big picture, using *The Story: The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People*. We have our own big picture of The Story: this window. It is designed to be read, just like the stained glass windows of European cathedrals. The window is structurally designed in four vertical bays, but thematically designed as five acts with a prelude. The prelude is God himself. The five acts are the five major stages in his dealings with the world: creation, Israel, Christ, church, and consummation. For our Advent meditation today we will look at this window in these six parts. Between each part we will sing, which is especially appropriate on this, the Third Sunday of Advent, whose theme is Joy.

## Prelude: God

Before God can come to his world and his people, there must be a world and a people. But before that there must be God; and so we begin at the very top of the window with God, represented by two symbols. On the left is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In the Old Testament God declared, "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Isa 44:6 ESV; cf. 48:12). In the New Testament Jesus applies the same language to himself: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13; cf. 1:8, 17; 21:6). Everything begins and ends with God, and so our thinking must begin and end with God, otherwise we'll get everything wrong.

The symbol on the right is the triquetra, an ancient symbol for the Trinity. God is and always has been triune: three in one. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father: "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, he the Source, the Ending He." The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father through the Son. Before the story begins, God was already there as a community of perfect love, goodness and fulfillment. Any love that we experience is possible only because of the love which exists within the Trinity. This love has no need of anything or anyone else—that includes us and this world.

These two symbols are set against a backdrop of cerulean blue, heavenly blue, the precious color that was used in medieval and renaissance art to represent heaven. What is heaven? Heaven is the realm where God is fully present.

## Act 1: Creation

Completely fulfilled within the community of the Godhead, God had no need for anything. Nevertheless, he chose to create a world

for his glory and pleasure, and thus begins the story. Creation is the first act, and the first bay of our window.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). He created through his word: ten words. We later find that this word is the Son himself. Present also is the Spirit, ready to execute God's will. Starting with a blank slate covered with darkness and sea, God formed the world, then filled it, creating order and fullness. He spoke light into the darkness and put the sun, moon and stars in place. He created birds for the sky, fish for the sea, and animals for the land, each after their kind. Then he created humans, not after their kind, but after his kind, in his image. To them he delegated rule over his earth. He endowed his blessing upon all life, ensuring that all would be fruitful and successful. He saw that all this was very good: it was exactly what he intended.

In this ordered cosmos, he planted a garden, his sanctuary on earth. Here was the tree of life; from here flowed life-giving water. It was here in paradise, filled with life, that God put the humans to enjoy his bountiful provision. Here they were at harmony with him, with themselves, and with creation. God placed them in his sanctuary to serve him and to keep a single commandment: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had no need of that knowledge, for God had declared what was good. All they need do was heed his word, and enjoy him forever. It was all very good.

## Act 2: Israel

At Advent we remember God's promises to Israel. But why Israel? Why is it given such prominence in the Bible? The second act of our story is Israel. It has its beginning in the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. But we will not understand Israel or the subsequent acts of the Biblical story if we don't understand what happened between the garden and Abraham—events which, with one important exception, are absent from our window.

Something went wrong in paradise. Eve decided that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good, and she took. This is the root of all sin: we make our own decisions of what is good and evil, and we act on them. In so doing, we reject God who, as creator, is the only one qualified to declare what is good and evil.

God expelled the humans from his garden; they were no longer fit to live in his sanctuary, in his presence. Death entered the world, and "thorns infest the ground." But God launched a plan of redemption to remove sin, death and evil from his world and to bring humanity back to himself. He promised that humanity would have an offspring who would crush the serpent (Gen 3:15).

In the short run though, things went from bad to worse: Cain killed his brother, the sons of God intermarried with the daughters of men, humanity gathered to build a tower to heaven. Repeatedly God intervened to limit evil. He even performed a complete remodel, undoing creation in the Flood, then uncovering a new world. None of this solved the problem of evil, but it clarified the extent of

evil: the natural tendency of humanity is to sink into self-centered sin. We will never understand Biblical history if we don't appreciate the depths of this problem.

Nevertheless, God made a commitment to keep the earth going, hanging his bow in the sky as a sign to himself: "Never again" (Gen 8:21). A rainbow arches across the window. Everything that subsequently happens, both the good and the evil, happens under this bow. It is against this backdrop of sin and his covenant commitment to creation that God calls Abraham, promising to give him offspring, a land and his blessing, and to bless all nations through him (Gen 12:2-3). The call of Abraham is God's answer to sin and evil: he begins to form a people for himself and to prepare a home for them.

The second bay of the window, under the cross, shows Israel on pilgrimage from Egypt through Sinai to Jerusalem. Moses leads the Israelites through the sea, after the slaying of the Passover lambs. God repeatedly identifies himself to Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This is the Old Testament paradigm of salvation: God defeated the forces of evil to deliver his people from bondage to freedom. A vine winds through the scene, for Israel was God's vine (Ps 80; Isa 5:1-7)

Next we see Mt Sinai and the Ten Commandments. God brought his people through the wilderness to Sinai. Here he met with them and formally took them as his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:4-6). He gave them the two tablets of the Law, the Ten Words, his treaty document binding him and his people together in covenant. He gave them his law: "Be holy, for I am holy." He provided a sacrificial system to atone for sin. This was all so that Israel might dwell in the presence of a holy God.

The trumpets represent four things. Trumpets were blown at each stage of Israel's journey through the wilderness. Every fifty years a trumpet was blown in the Year of Jubilee (*Yobel*, trumpet; Lev 25) to proclaim liberty. Trumpets were blown at Jericho to open Israel's entrance into the Promised Land (Josh 6), into their home. Finally, trumpets were blown for the coronation of the king, represented by the crown. God appointed this king over his kingdom to lead his people in righteousness and justice.

The final panel shows Jerusalem and its temple. Here in Zion God and his people dwelt together. The goal of Israel's pilgrimage was God himself. In Israel God redeemed a people for himself, and in Zion he dwelt with them: the people in the city, and God in their midst in the temple.

### Act 3: Christ

The third act is Christ, represented by the cross, surmounted by the Lion and the Lamb. Here Advent reaches its focal point.

Just as something had gone wrong in Paradise, so something went wrong in Israel. The nation broke faith, going the same way as Adam. The vineyard became ruined; it had ruined itself. Intended to be the solution to the problem, Israel became part of the problem. Called to be a holy nation, Israel became indistinguishable from the other nations. God finally removed his presence and expelled Israel from the land, just as he had expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. But he promised "captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile," that he would come and save his people, as we remember at Advent.

God was true to his promise: he did come to his people, but not in the way Israel was expecting. They expected a conquering hero, a lion from the tribe of Judah, who would destroy God's enemies, Israel's enemies. But God sent his own Son: "the Light of light de-

scendeth from the realms of endless day." "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). "God with man is now residing," "pleased as man with men to dwell." He shone light into the world. Jesus healed lepers and pronounced forgiveness of sins. To those who cried out, "Lord have mercy," he gave mercy. The leaders didn't make that cry; they wanted justice not mercy, for they assumed they were in the right and everyone else in the wrong. Jesus made a final pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its temple, joining with all Israel. Finding the temple to be a den of rebels he cleansed it, an implicit claim to be the king, for the spiritual health of the temple, of God's earthly dwelling-place, was the responsibility of the king, the one appointed by God to tend and care for his kingdom.

This was too much! Saying, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15), the Jewish leaders banded with their supposed enemies, the Romans, to kill Jesus, to extinguish this light. The Son of God died on the cross as the rest of Israel ate its Passover lambs and remembered its deliverance from Egypt.

Evil reached its climax, making its greatest assault against God and his purposes. The ruler of the kingdom of darkness brought even the Son of God into his realm of death, removing the light which God had again spoken into the world. Throughout the sabbath day Jesus' body lay in the grave, and the destiny of the world hung in the balance. On the Sunday, the eighth day, the first day of a new week, God raised his Son from death. This Son, who had taken on human form as the new image of God, had done no wrong; he had done what Adam and Israel had failed to do: be a faithful and obedient servant. Therefore death could not hold him. God vindicated him in the resurrection, and again in the ascension, raising him back to heaven where he has installed him as King.

The lamb atop the cross is in the form of an ancient symbol, the *agnus Dei*, or Lamb of God. The Lamb stands as though slain (Rev 5:6). He is pierced by the cross, but from the cross flies the banner of resurrection, a red cross against a white background. The halo indicates divinity for this is the Son of God. God himself entered into human history to defeat evil and put the world right, even at great cost to himself. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's enemies are defeated: not the Romans nor the Jews, but evil, Satan, death and sin. With Jesus' ascension to heaven there is a human in God's presence. With Christ's enthronement there is a faithful and true ruler over God's kingdom. The Son returns to the Father, fully justifying his declaration, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet 1:17).

We rejoice that God has been faithful to his promises. The theme of this Third Sunday of Advent is Joy. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!" wrote the psalmist (Ps 98:4). Isaac Watts rewrote this psalm, reimagining it through the lens of Christ: "Joy to the World! the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King."

### Act 4: Church

The fourth act, represented by the third bay under the cross, is the church. In the death and resurrection of his Son, God has defeated evil: sin, Satan, death. He has installed a king over his kingdom. But what good does that do us, especially the majority of us that are not part of Israel? Through his Spirit, always represented as a dove, God births a new people on earth. As he spoke light into darkness in the

beginning, God through his Spirit now shines his light into our dark hearts (2 Cor 4:6), breathes his life into our dead bodies, brings order to our disorder, fills our emptiness. Through his Spirit God gives us the resurrection life of his Son, giving us faith in the provision that he has made in his Son for our salvation.

God calls us to live out our lives in the Spirit. This is reflected in the structure of the Church Year. It begins now with Advent when we remember God's promise to come to his people. Christmas and the Nativity mark the fulfillment of that promise in the birth of our Savior. Then Epiphany: his baptism and entrance into public ministry. Lent marks his forty days of testing in the wilderness, wherein, unlike the testing of Adam and Israel, Jesus was faithful. Palm Sunday marks his entrance into Jerusalem at the end of his pilgrimage. At the other end of Holy Week lie Good Friday and Easter Sunday, his death and resurrection. Forty days later, Ascension: his return to heaven and enthronement as King. Finally, Pentecost: the gift of the Spirit. But this still leaves half the year: from Pentecost until the beginning of Advent again six months later. This is "ordinary time," our time during which we live out our story in the light of the Jesus story. The Spirit is God's empowering presence with us, enabling us to live the resurrection life of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The vine that was Israel winds also through this panel. Jesus declared, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). He was the faithful remnant of Israel distilled down to one, the only one who was faithful to God. Into this true vine, Jew and Gentile together are now being grafted as branches. And so we enter into the story, into the big picture. Israel's story becomes our story; Jesus' story becomes our story.

The church is a community, here represented by three people with arms embraced. We are a community gathered around the Scriptures, which tell the story of God's saving work in Christ. And we are gathered around the eucharist: the cup and the broken bread in which we commune with one another and with God, in which we remember and proclaim the Lord's death, and in which we express our ongoing identification with the Christ.

There are three pairs of hands. The top pair is reached up, both to receive the Holy Spirit, and in praise to God. The middle pair, two hands of different colors, is reached out in peace and reconciliation, for the church is a family in which all are reconciled, not only to God, but also to one another, in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The third pair of hands reaches out to the world, for Christ has sent his people out into all the world as his witnesses (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8), as we have been tracing in the Book of Acts. From all nations Jesus Christ is assembling a people for his Father. The church sends out missionaries to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel. The church itself is also missional, sent into the world as God's agent of healing, sent to be salt and light.

God has gathered us in Christ as his family, the people of the risen King.

## Act 5: Consummation

The fourth vertical bay depicts the fifth and final act, the climax of the Biblical stories of creation and redemption. This is where the rainbow leads, to the new heavens and the new earth. The joining of heaven and earth is not possible until evil is removed from earth and all is made holy and therefore fit for God's presence. Here all space and time is holy, and God's presence is universal.

Purple represents the royal majesty of God. Trumpets again proclaim the coronation of the king, this time the King of kings (Rev

17:14; 19:16). The cry goes up, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15).

In Revelation John sees an innumerable multitude from all nations gathered in heaven singing praise to God and the Lamb (Rev 7:9-10). In the window we see God's people gathered as a community with harp and lyre singing praise to God. God's people are a people who sing, both here and in heaven. We have been given much to sing about. We have been redeemed to the praise of his glory. Therefore we rejoice.

The goal of our pilgrimage is New Jerusalem, a city so vast that it fills the whole cosmos. This is the city of God's people and the city of God himself. But here there is no temple, for God himself is its temple. The twelve jewels in the foundations represent the people of God, for this city is the people. This is the heavenly city built by God for those who long to dwell in his presence.

The city is also Paradise restored. Here the river of life flows from God's throne (Rev 22:1-2), bringing life. Here the tree of life grows on either side of the river; its leaves are for the healing of the nations. Here the lion and the lamb lie down together (Isa 65:25, cf. 11:6), as peace, harmony, wholeness and shalom are restored to the created order. The whole creation, which, "far as the curse is found," has been groaning, is released from its bondage to decay and brought into glorious freedom (Rom 8:19-22).

Here the stories of creation and redemption reach their climax. The one story is contained within the other, redemption within creation. The end is not just a recovery of the beginning but something much better. The first creation was very good but it was not perfect, it had not been brought to its intended goal. The sanctification of the seventh day raised the possibility that holiness might be extended to the whole creation. Though Adam and Eve dwelt in God's earthly sanctuary their experience of God's direct presence was limited, for heaven and earth were separate realms. In the new heavens and the new earth, these two realms are joined together: the heavenly city descends to earth. All space and time is holy. God's presence is fully experienced, for we "will see his face" (Rev 22:4). This will be our great reward. The end is far better than the beginning.

Within this larger story of creation, unfolds the story of redemption. We don't know why God allows evil in his world, but we do see what God is doing about evil: he is in the process of removing it entirely. At the center stands the cross.

He delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to himself to dwell in his presence. Through the death and resurrection of his Son, and the life-giving ministry of his Spirit, he has delivered us from bondage to sin and death to bring us to himself to dwell in his presence. At the heart lies God's oft-repeated purpose statement: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you," gloriously fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth:

**"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev 21:3)**

This is the promise of Advent: Immanuel, God with us.

*Now may he, who by his incarnation, gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, grant you a spirit of joy and peace as you celebrate the birth of Jesus: Immanuel, God with us.*



