

'We Need a Little Christmas'

By Josette Keelor

*Haul out the holly
Put up the tree before my spirit falls again
Fill up the stockings
I may be rushing things, but deck the halls again now
For we need a little Christmas
Right this very minute
Candles in the window
Carols at the spinet
Yes, we need a little Christmas
Right this very minute ...
We need a little Christmas now
...
For I've grown a little leaner
Grown a little colder
Grown a little sadder
Grown a little older
And I need a little angel
Sitting on my shoulder
[I] need a little Christmas now
For we need a little music
Need a little laughter
Need a little singing, ringing through the rafter
And we need a little snappy
Happy ever after
[We] need a little Christmas now
- Jerry Herman*

Today is the first day of Advent, a season of preparation, a time marked by urgent anticipation and a longing for the fulfillment of what has been promised. (Mark Allan Powell)

But we seem to do it all wrong these days, don't we?

More and more, it seems that our season of preparation has *become* the celebration, while the actual day of Christmas is this unachievable ball of perfection that we can never quite hold within our hands and inevitably can't wait to be done with. Of course, I use the words "we" and "ours" loosely. But these issues are most telling to me when I hear from people how stressful their Christmas Day is because of all the expectations they've put on themselves, or how it didn't live up to expectations. Inevitably, by Dec. 26, after five to seven weeks of nonstop Christmas music, decorations, parties, lights, shopping trips,

cookie baking, gift-giving, and other holiday-related activities, we're all so sick of Christmas that we might be itching to return to a sense of normalcy.

It's backwards. Instead of expectantly and joyfully awaiting the happy day of Christmas upon which we celebrate the start of something great—the birth of Jesus and arrival of our salvation—we instead celebrate the joyful season of expectancy until Christmas Day, upon which we can close the door on a deliriously wild ride of traditions that we hardly know why we maintain and perpetuate anymore.

Though Thanksgiving has long been the official start of the Christmas season in the U.S., in recent years the season has stretched even farther back on the calendar. Radio stations switch over to Christmas music on the Friday before Thanksgiving, which, at its earliest, is Nov. 16, and we all know those big box stores that put out Christmas merchandise alongside the Halloween decor.

And that's not even including the surrealness of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remember, last April, in the middle of Lent, when people were putting out Christmas lights to cheer themselves up during those first few days of the pandemic when everyone was home from work and school, businesses were closed, and stores were out of toilet paper?

It's interesting to see how, when things are at their worst, people turn to Christmas as a way to calm their fears.

Yet, even then, we had no idea how the pandemic would stretch into the holiday season, upending yet another set of traditions we hold so dear.

Family get-togethers, charitable functions, and church services are all in a state of uncertainty, as each day brings the news of more COVID cases, and we never know if we'll be meeting for church in person or online, or if we'll have the means to celebrate in the way we always have and thought we always would.

Today, on this first day of Advent, we not only begin our yearly symbolic preparation for the birth of Jesus, but also, in today's Gospel reading from Mark, anticipate the next coming of Christ, when Jesus will take His followers to Heaven with Him and leave everyone else behind.

“[I]n those days, after that suffering...,” Mark says, “they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

In 2020, during a pandemic, we have a unique perspective for understanding Mark's words like we rarely have experienced before.

He starts off this passage speaking of long days of suffering from which Jesus will return to save us. It kind of feels that way now, doesn't it, when from one day to the next we have no idea what's going to happen or who's going to fall ill? We're all hopeful of a proven vaccine in the coming weeks, and many people talk wistfully of a return to normal. But if there's anything the pandemic has taught us over the last eight months, it's that we really can't take anything for granted.

People who thought they had cushy jobs were declared nonessential and told to stay home.

People who had booked exciting vacations that they might have spent years saving for had to cancel their plans.

People who were planning to retire soon saw their 401K accounts diminish as stock prices plummeted.

The pandemic came in swiftly and mercilessly, upending whatever security we thought we had in the earthly items we had placed in high regard. Suddenly, all that mattered were the essentials—shelter, food, health care, and toilet paper ... as well as the love of family and friends, support of community programs, and trust in God that we would make it through.

All those other things—movie theaters, travel, cocktail hours...? Gone. These are things we thought mattered a lot. They required so much of our money, energy, and headspace; we would spend all our downtime on nights and weekends pursuing these things. But now they don't seem to matter. At least for the foreseeable future, they're a thing of the past. That's not to say we haven't found other unimportant things to fill our time—Netflix, online shopping, video games, or hours of watching YouTube.

Mark's gospel reading warns of such distractions that would make us too complacent and both physically and spiritually exhausted to recognize when Jesus returns.

"Beware, keep alert," he says, "for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

So, what can we do? As we await the coming of Jesus both symbolically and ultimately, how might we be *in* the world but not *of* it? What, after all, is so wrong with enjoying the build-up to Christmas in our joy and expectation?

I think the answer to that question comes in our purpose. When the preparations *become* the celebration, then Jesus is no longer our focus. It would be like if we threw seven weeks of festivities for our friends who were expecting a baby, but then when the baby arrived, we said, “Well, thank goodness that’s over. All those baby showers and gender reveal parties? I must have gained ten pounds!”

But mostly, I don’t think it’s about abstaining from holiday celebrations. We must not let ourselves be so weighed down by preparations and earthly expectations that we can’t recognize Christmas when it arrives. We must not be so overladen with earthly festivities that we can’t stay awake for the new day that Christmas brings.

In a sermon at WorkingPreacher.com, Mark Allen Powell writes:

There is much to celebrate in this wonderful world, but the days in which we live are described in Mark as a time for fasting as well as feasting, as a time in which we will often be acutely aware of the absence of our Lord and Savior.

For many, life in this world is actually not very pleasant. But even those fortunate enough to have a life filled with joy and blessing should not be satisfied to the point of complacency. There is more! There is better!

The season of Advent invites us to wait impatiently for the consummation of hope, longing to know God as fully as we have been known; to see no longer through a dark pane, but face to face; to love as we have been loved; to experience Jesus Christ as he is, and in so doing, to become like him (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

So, yes, haul out the holly, put up the tree, and fill up the stockings, for we really do need a little Christmas now.

Prepare yourself mentally and spiritually to receive the blessing of Jesus every December the 25th as a yearly reprieve until that undeclared day when He will return. But also recognize that this is a season of preparation, not a season of feast days. We should be looking ahead to when Jesus will come, secure in our belief that He will save us.

Mark’s Gospel gives no explanation as to why there is suffering, Powell writes.

But we do get a promise: When all is said and done, we will have our “happy ever after” — and it will never end.