



November 2019

Dear Friends,

The beautiful autumn leaves have fallen, and we've even had a first skiffle of snow. And we Anglicans are entering the season of Advent, a time in which we live and wait in hope as we contemplate the ways in which Jesus is present for us now and promises to return in the future.

Historically, Christians have celebrated Advent and prepared for Christmas and Epiphany in many ways. Perhaps you have a few cherished traditions. I like to begin decorating on the first Sunday of Advent and continue through the season, to culminate on Christmas Eve with a figure of Baby Jesus in the creche and a few gifts under the tree. Some people use an Advent Wreath to connect home life to the worship of the Church, or blue napkins to fit with the colour of the season. A Nativity set can be a fabulous way to teach the Christmas story and build anticipation for the celebration of Christ's birth. And who doesn't love an Advent Calendar, (especially when it's filled with chocolates)?

Advent marks a time of holy longing and anticipation. It invites our contemplation of the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist; of Mary, Joseph, the angel Gabriel, and the long journey to Bethlehem. During Advent, we both mourn the brokenness of the world and participate in the sacred hope that Christ has come and will come again.

Yet there's an issue. In our culture, Christmas starts early, really early. Our local Costco had artificial Christmas trees on sale by mid-October this year. Community programming for Christmas begins as the children put away their Hallowe'en costumes. We want to observe a holy Advent, but if the church rigidly delays the celebration of Christmas

until December 24, we risk being interpreted as out of touch and irrelevant. Yet, the theological practices of Advent and Christmas do not have to be mutually exclusive. We choose instead to live in the tension. Celebration and anticipation, we commemorate the birth of Christ while awaiting His return.

To mark Advent is to make space for the important Christian practices of stillness, silence, and longing. Jesus has been born. We are waiting for Him to come again. Advent's purpose is to remind us that these two events are separate, but equally important.

During Christmas, we experience shadows of Advent. From "O Holy Night" to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," Christmas hymns turn our hearts to the plight of oppressed and impoverished people and remind us of the hope for peace found in Jesus.

Giving gifts is an analogy of the gift God gave to us in Jesus. Jesus' birth reminds us that we are recipients of the unbridled generosity of God who comes to live among us. Also, the holy waiting of Advent combined with the unfettered celebration of Christmas helps us embrace the sacred complexity of this season. We light candles in the darkness, we proclaim hope through the silence, and we embrace peace amidst the violence of a world in desperate need of peace.

We decorate our trees, today if we want. It might give pleasure to our families, our neighbours, our friends and strangers too. More than that, lighting our trees at random times through the Holy Season is a reminder that we celebrate Christ's coming, and anticipate his second coming, all year long.

In Epiphany, we change focus. After contemplating the birth of Jesus as a human child, we contemplate Jesus as God. Epiphany is an opportunity for each of us to discern our own response to God's love for us. Each of us is uniquely gifted by God, and our responses will be different, but all will be inspired by love.

In whatever way you plan to prepare to celebrate our Lord's birth, it is my prayer that it be safe and filled with joy, peace and love.

Sincerely, Joan.

Reverend Joan Riding

*God of all heaven and earth,
From the breath of your love came the creation of the world.
We are amazed humbled at the love you have for us, your children.
Guide our lives to search for Kingdom love.
May we always choose truth in all that we do,
Forever trusting, hoping and believing in your word.
And finally, lead us home. Amen.*