

112/11/2022 “ADVENT YOU SAY?”

**REVEREND MATTHEW PARGETER-VILLARREAL**

The phrase “come to Jesus meeting” is one of the more colourful expressions that has entered common English usage in recent years. The official formal definition of the phrase, according to Merriam-Webster, is “a moment of sudden realisation, comprehension, or recognition that precipitates a major change” and, despite its Christian religious connotations, does not necessarily require a particular belief in the son of God from either party involved. But, in the Southern vernacular that I subscribe to—and from which the phrase is generally considered to have originated—having a come to Jesus meeting is when you need to have strong (but, of course, polite) words with someone in order to inform them of the need to do or not do certain things.

I found myself having several “come-to-Jesus” with my friends on social media this year; the majority of which were on November 1, as they began to wake up and immediately post videos that included the familiar introductory strains of a song that has become the bane of my existence and which I despise with the fire of a thousand suns: the 1994 cringe-worthy mega-hit that is Mariah Carey’s “All I Want For Christmas is You.”

My objections were based upon several factors. Firstly, in the great panoply of Christmas carols and Christmas songs that have been sung across many generations—some of which have been written by the greatest composers in history and sung by some of the most iconic vocalists in music—why in the world are we still coming back to that one every single year? Secondly, I am of the strongly held core belief that the period of time from November 1 to the fourth Thursday in November is reserved solely for the observance of and preparation for the frequently forgotten holiday of Thanksgiving. But also,—as many of my seminary colleagues saw fit to remind myself and

everyone else who would listen to them—you cannot prepare to celebrate Christmas without observing and getting through Advent first.

My initial memories of Advent come from my days as a Catholic school kid and not understanding why the sisters were so adamant about us not singing Christmas songs well into December (something I still feel as someone who has been known to listen to Christmas music in the middle of the summer). I also did not understand why all of our classrooms and the chapel had suddenly sprung up green wreaths that had pastel coloured candles. Purple? Pink? Those are Easter colours, aren't they? What happened to red, white, green, and gold? What is this Advent that they keep on talking about? It's not on any of my calendars.

What I came to understand later is that Advent is not an actual holiday on the calendar per se, but a season that begins the lead up to the observance of Christmas. The importance of Christmas was not the presents, or the lights, or the songs, or the letter and the cookies left out for Santa (or Father Christmas, as my British family refers to him). It was about the birth of Jesus, and Advent is meant to be a time of preparation and reflection in preparation for the birth of Jesus into the world—the literal meaning of Advent from the Latin word *adventus* meaning “arrival.”

I learned that the wreath that you see on Advent was a tradition that was started by German Lutherans in the 16th century, adopted by Roman Catholics in Germany in the 1920s, and brought to the United States in the 1930s. It was originally much larger and had 20 red and four white candles that were lit to count down the days until Christmas; eventually, the number of candles was reduced to four over the years and became the colours that you see today. The importance of the wreath was that it was circular, which was meant to signify the infinite love that is received from God. Each of the candles had a significance: they were meant to stand for a different aspect of the process of

preparing ourselves for the arrival of Christmas: faith, hope, love, and joy. Three of the candles were purple because purple is a colour associated with preparation of what is to come—the same purple that you see during the Christian observance of Lent. The one pink candle different from all the others is intended to stand out—it is a candle that is indicative of the joy and peace on earth that is to come. By the time that you arrive at Christmas, the preparation that you have undergone is meant to make the celebrations of Christmas that much more special, festive, and meaningful.

But all of this was more than 20 years ago. I was much younger then and was only at the beginning of what would be a lifelong spiritual journey of exploration and discovery that would, like many of us who have been UUs for a while, take us down different roads from what we grew up with and what we once believed and understood as children. As someone who routinely preaches on lifting up our Third and Fourth Principles of “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth” and “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” I am a firm believer in look back into one’s past and bringing the traditions that still have meaning and importance with you and respectfully parting ways with those that you may have once believed, but no longer serve you now. So, the question that I find myself arriving at this holiday season is: *what does Advent have to say and to teach us as UUs? What kind of meaning can it have for us this holiday season?*

This is especially hard question for me because I am someone who absolutely LOVES anything and everything having to do with Christmas. I am all about the lights, the decorations, the sights, the sounds, the smells, the music (except for the aforementioned Mariah Carey song), the holiday baking, the ugly sweaters, the joyful overstimulation of my ADHD, all of it. But, the past few years, what I have noticed is that it has become less and less about the experience of Christmas and more and more about the rampant consumerism that has come to be associated with Christmas: how

many shopping days are left until Christmas, how to take advantage of all the Black Friday and Cyber Monday deals online and in stores, have I gotten gifts for everyone on my list and have I mailed out my gifts in enough time for them to arrive before Christmas? Don't get me wrong; I love giving and exchanging gifts with those that are close to me. But the beauty of the Christmas holiday for me is that there has always been an existential sense of peace that comes with the holiday season that I look forward to every year. It is as if for just a moment, there is a pause when we get to look back on all the events of the year that has taken place and we get to take a much-needed deep breath. It is almost like we are getting the chance to say: "Look at everything that has happened this year. Look at everything that I have gotten through." At that point, the holidays become our much-needed release; a chance to relax and give ourselves a moment of long overdue celebration as we close out the year and prepare ourselves for what is to come in the next year.

In that sense, the invitation of celebrating Advent becomes for me an intentional spiritual practice. It becomes a moment to physically pull myself away from my desire to need a little Christmas right this very minute and to reorient myself to what is important to me at this time of year. It also is a chance for a moment of escape in this moment of holiday chaos, when so much is going on and stress levels can be at their breaking point and give myself time to breathe and slow down and notice things a little differently and a little more deeply, reminding myself what it is about this season that I love so much.

On perhaps a grander scale, it is a chance for me to light a candle—a physical action of creating light and warmth in a time of both physical cold and darkness and the cold and dark that comes with uncertain times in our greater world. Many years ago, I was invited to attend a Yule ritual that was being hosted by a local Pagan group in north Texas. I remember being struck by how,

sitting in the mid-winter stillness, how grounded and connected I felt to the earth and to others around me who were also participating in the ritual. I remember feeling my dwindling spirit instantly filled by a sense of connection that I had not felt that holiday season.

The reading that we heard this morning from Quinn G. Caldwell captures a sense of the same feeling I felt in that Yule ritual—and the feeling that I so desperately yearn for in the weeks leading up to the holidays. As selfish and naive as it sounds, I want to escape all of the trappings of commercial Christmas and be held in the childlike wonder of the moment. I want to experience the magic and awe of seeing the glimmer of colourful twinkling lights. I want to walk around a winter wonderland with a cup of hot coffee and just take in the magnitude of the moment that is all around me—to feel the familiarity of what I have felt in holidays past. My soul longs for not the *chronos* of what will happen in the next minute or the next, but to spend a seemingly endless moment in the *kairos* of what is. If the lighting of a candle at Advent—whether it still means for me what it once did or if it means something different to me now that makes more sense—then it is a tradition that I will seek out and bring with me. And it is something that I will invite others to do the same.

And so, my friends, I ask you the same questions that Quinn Caldwell asks of us in the reading: *what are things or traditions around this time of year that do that for you? What brings your back to your childhood (or to whatever your happy place is) at warp speed?* As Caldwell implores us, I invite to find whatever it is and plan to do it soon. As for me, I will continue to light the candles on the Advent wreath to remind me of those moments, slow down and be appreciative of all the moments of *chronos* that have led up to this moment, and take time to enjoy the *kairos* that is all around me this season. I cannot think of anything that I would want more this holiday.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste.

Happy holidays.