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*Living Lutheran*,  
December 2022

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## Study guide

# When your Advent calendar is broken

By Robert C. Blezard

In just the four weeks before Christmas, the church season of Advent endeavors to prepare us for the tremendous changes God is bringing to us in the birth of Jesus. In his own day, Jesus flew under just about everyone's radar because he defied expectations of how the Messiah would come, what he would look like, how he would act and talk, and what his priorities would be. Advent should be a time when we prepare to have our 21st-century expectations shattered, so that the Messiah doesn't fly under our radar as well. It's a task complicated by our sentimental, consumer-colored celebration of Christmas that has overshadowed Advent.

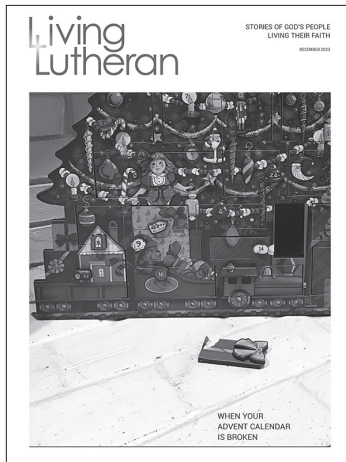
### EXERCISE 1: WHAT HAPPENED TO ADVENT?

In some stores in my town, Christmas merchandise arrived on the shelves weeks before Halloween. By the time Advent rolled around at the end of November, our culture was already driving "Full Speed Ahead to Christmas," with Santa, Rudolph and Frosty leading the way. As every year, lost in the Christmas frenzy is Advent.

Before the 20th century, Advent was observed as a time of reserve and piety. Just as Lent is a season of prayer leading to Easter, Advent was a time for prayer, devotions, worship, study, spiritual disciplines, etc., to prepare the faithful for Christmas. Celebration and parties? Shopping and consumption? Christians would put them on hold until Christmas Day, Dec. 25, but then the feasting and partying would go for 12 days—ending with the Day of Epiphany, Jan. 6. That's the back story of the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas." It harkens back to that time when Christmas celebrations took place *after* Dec. 25.

With Christmas celebrations beginning earlier and earlier, not to mention increasingly becoming commercial and over-the-top, Christians must work extra hard to reclaim Advent's original purpose and themes of waiting, hoping and prayerfully preparing for Christmas. Discuss:

- What does Advent mean to you? To your congregation? How well does our church and your congregation teach people about the meaning of Advent and preparing for Christmas?
- What thoughts cross your mind as you learn about Advent's place in Christian life before the 20th century? What have we lost? What have we gained? Was the gain worth the loss?
- What forces have driven the rise of the early-Christmas culture and corresponding decline of Advent as a season of spiritual preparation?



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## Study guide: **Advent** *continued*

- Why does Christmas merchandise appear in stores earlier and earlier each year? Why is Christmas merchandise removed from the shelves on Dec. 26 to make way for Valentine's Day candy, cards and gifts?
- In your devotion life, and that of your family, what concrete steps can you take to reclaim Advent's purpose in your faith life? What can your congregation do?
- **For action:** As a study committee, put together an "Advent Reclamation Plan" that would steer your congregation toward a fuller appreciation for Advent and its place on the church calendar.

### EXERCISE 2: ADVENT THEMES

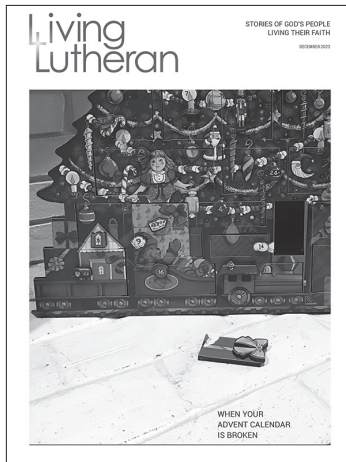
The four weeks of Advent each carry a traditional theme that Christians for generations have celebrated and used to guide their prayers and devotions. Consider each one in the perspective of Advent's role of preparing us for the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah:

- **Hope:** What does hope mean? What relation does hope have to the coming of the Messiah? For you? For Christians? For our world? Why is hope an appropriate theme for Advent?
- **Peace:** How would you define peace? What is peace to you and every other individual and family? What is peace to your community? Our nation? Our world? What peace do we expect the Messiah to bring? Why is peace an appropriate Advent theme?
- **Joy:** What is joy? How is it different from happiness? What does happiness add to your life? What does joy? Which would you prefer? When it comes to faith and the promises of God, what does joy mean to you? Your family? Our world? Why is joy an appropriate Advent theme?
- **Love:** In our culture, love has lots of meanings. What is "love" in a Christian and faith context? In this context, what does it mean for you, your family, congregation and our world? Why is love an appropriate Advent theme?
- How do the themes of hope, peace, joy and love interrelate to help us prepare for the coming of the Messiah?

### EXERCISE 3: DOMESTICATED CHRISTMAS?

In his article, Tim Brown laments how much of our celebration of Christmas has devolved into a "predictable, overly romantic, sentimental little practice," characterized by the nativity scene featuring a placid Mary and Joseph doting on an infant dozing in a manger, surrounded by animals, shepherds, angels and (eventually) the magi. Would you agree? Discuss:

- Describe the nativity displays you have in your home, congregation or community. What others come to mind as you think of them?
- What lessons or messages do you think the typical nativity scene conveys?
- What emotions does a nativity display evoke for you?



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## Study guide: **Advent** *continued*

- Do you agree with Brown that the nativity scenes are often romanticized and sentimentalized? Why or why not?
- Does the typical nativity scene capture the deprivation and hardship inherent in the Bible story? Consider:

While journeying in winter, a man and his pregnant wife cannot find decent lodging.

The couple is relegated to sheltering in a place for and with animals. Imagine the dirt, grime, and stench of manure and animal urine.

Amid that squalor, the woman gives birth to her child.

Oh, and that child happens to be the Messiah, the one in whom the fullness of the divine was pleased to dwell.

- If the nativity scene were updated to reflect a similar journey in 21st-century North America, what might be a realistic depiction of their journey? Consider these and think of some of your own:

Joseph and Mary spend the night in their car in a Walmart parking lot in a suburban shopping district. Jesus is born in the back seat. His birth is announced by angels to the graveyard-shift employees of the nearby stores and restaurants. They come to pay him homage.

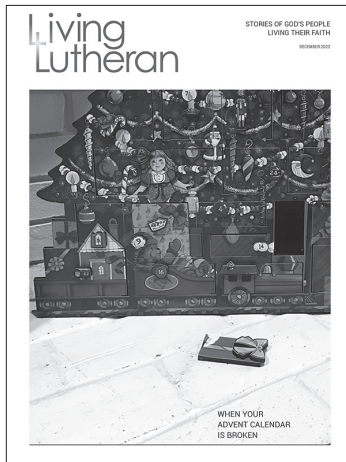
Joseph and Mary squat for the night in a homeless encampment in woods behind the interstate motels that turned them away. Jesus is born in a tent, and angels announce his arrival to the homeless residents who gather around.

Joseph and Mary take refuge for the night in a 24-hour truck stop. Jesus is born in the “family restroom” there. Angels announce his birth to truck drivers, who come to see the newborn king.

### EXERCISE 4: JOHN’S WAKE-UP CALL

In the midst of our culture’s preparation for Christmas, Advent remembers John the Baptizer—the wild prophet who wore rough camel’s hair pelts and survived on a scavenger’s diet of wild honey and bugs. It was this undomesticated person who announced the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, God’s anointed, who would save God’s people from sin and death. Looking at the description of John the Baptizer and his message (Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3, John 1), discuss:

- What did he look like? How did he act? What would “polite folk” think of him? What would be a modern-day equivalent look like?
- What was the overall tone of his message? What emotions or thoughts was John trying to evoke among his hearers?
- In what ways did John the Baptizer “shake up” the religious status quo of his day? Does he shake us up similarly today? Why or why not?
- In what ways might you consider John the Baptizer to be an unlikely character to announce the arrival of the Messiah?



### About the study guide author:

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## Study guide: **Advent** *continued*

- In his day and among his culture, did John defy the expectations of religious folks about who would announce the coming of the Messiah? Explain.
- How might John's expectation-defying persona and message have been appropriate for the coming Messiah, who himself defied expectations of the religious culture?
- Along with the nativity scene, has our culture domesticated and sentimentalized John the Baptizer? How or how not?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Hope and optimism are related and often confused as the same thing, but are they? What do you see as the difference between hope and optimism? Which term is rooted in our faith in God? Why? What promises and assurances does God give us that leads us to credible hope?
- Tradition holds that Advent is a time of hope and waiting. For what are we hoping and waiting? What is it about Christmas that we hope and wait for? In our "I must have it now" society, how is hoping and waiting countercultural? If we adopt waiting and hoping as spiritual practices, how might that help us reclaim the beauty and joy of Advent?
- Modern culture has taken the rough edges off Christmas. We often see a Hallmark card view of a cuddly Jesus, a serene Mary, a dutiful Joseph, friendly shepherds and peaceful barnyard animals. Into this comes John the Baptizer—the wild, homeless, bug-eating prophet who dares to call the religious elites a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7). How did John shake up the religious scene of his day? How can he shake up our view of Christmas?
- Would you agree that Advent's traditional purpose—preparing for the Messiah—has been largely lost in our culture's emphasis on preparing for a commercial Christmas? What is the difference between waiting for Santa and waiting for Jesus? Why has Santa displaced Jesus as the main focal point of Christmas? What can we do about it?



# When Your Advent Calendar Is Broken

By Tim Brown



I remember one Sunday in church when my father was preaching.

He was getting all sorts of heated and passionate in the pulpit, you know, totally un-Lutheran in style. Back then sermons had three parts to them—the path was known and well-worn, and if you strayed from the path, it was odd.

He was just a few minutes in, already kind of heated, and a guy stood up in the congregation and said, “Now, hold on a minute!”

It was like all the heads were on a swivel as they turned to see Big Bill stand up in the middle of the congregation as he began to argue back with my father. I remember my 9-year-old self thinking, “Man, I wish I had some popcorn ... finally, something interesting in church!”

There was a guy sitting near Bill who said softly but not too softly, “Be quiet, Bill. Pastor Pete’s on a roll!”

Bill started walking up the middle aisle with a sheet of paper in his hand that he was reading from,

Which is kind of how I feel about John the Baptizer every year, beloved. “Who is this guy to interrupt our Christmas preparations?”

This guy doesn’t quite fit with the rest of the nativity scene.

Instead of the peaceful angels, the gentle shepherds and even the hopeful parents kneeling over their peaceful Christ child, John the Baptizer is a madman yelling from the fringes, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Everything that is a problem, God is fixing! Get on the work crew!”

John the Baptizer’s yelling breaks our silent night. He interrupts our festivities every year.

And it happens for good reason, friends.

Because we can get on a roll with this Christmas stuff, and soon the holiday becomes less holy. I’m not talking about a fake “war on Christmas” or anything

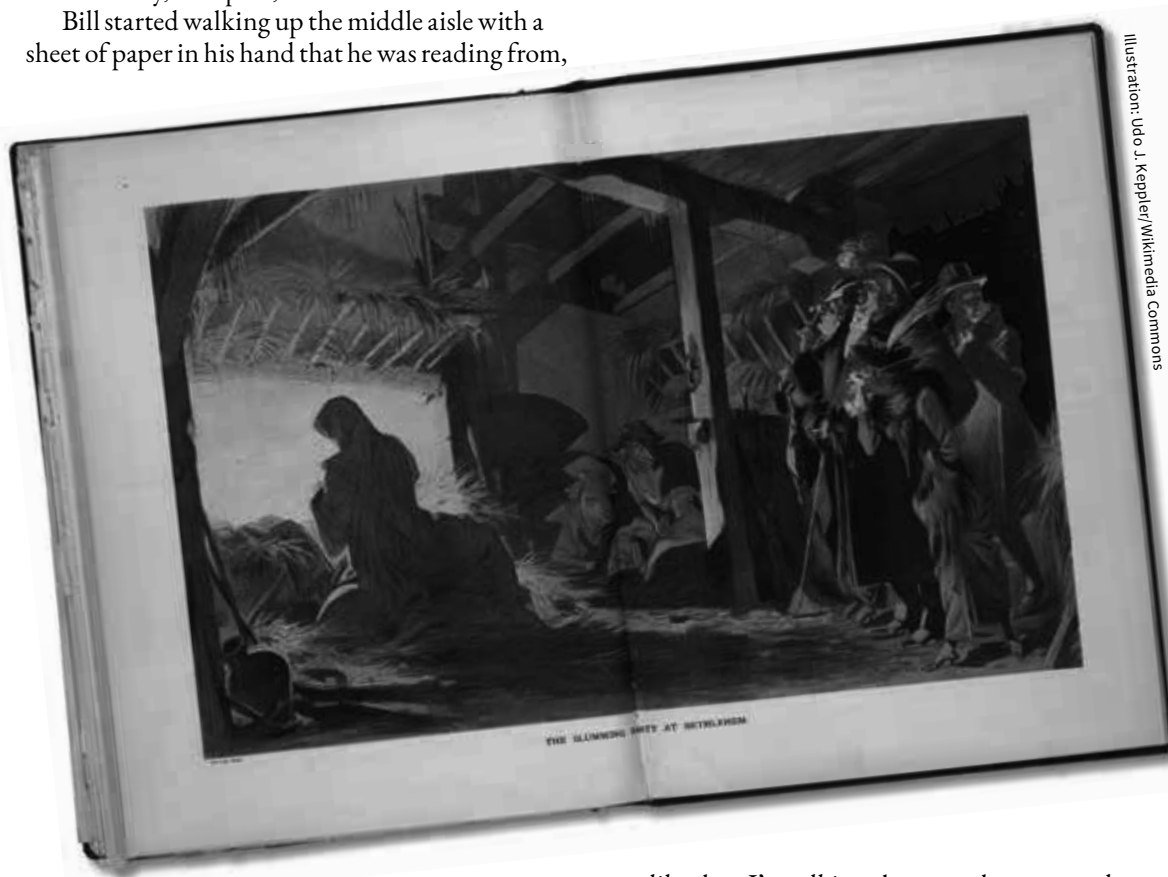


Illustration: Udo J. Keppler/Wikimedia Commons

and that’s when we all realized it was staged and part of the sermon. Every adult sighed a sigh of relief, and every youth and child was crestfallen because it wasn’t as exciting anymore.

But the sentiment that was shared in the moment was all the same, at least among the adults: “Who is Bill to disrupt everything? Who is Bill to break from tradition?”

like that. I’m talking about our human tendency to make things into something they are not.

I think we, especially Christians, tend to make Christmas into this time when we gather up all our hopes and put them into this perfect little scene, this little nativity scene, and it becomes this predictable, overly romantic, sentimental little practice that we do every year.

But if John the Baptizer reminds us of anything, it’s that Christmas is not sentimental—it is

scandalous. The baby in the manger is interested not in playing Christmas but in making mountains of shame disappear, valleys of despair into reservoirs of grace. Jesus is interested in calling us to help God make winding breadlines of inequality straight paths to full stomachs, and rough prejudice into smooth love.

And we need John the Baptizer to disrupt our sentimentality, to call us back to this, or else we'll sing, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

We'll sing that little carol and totally gloss over the fact that both the hopes (the sentiments) and the fears (the rough realities of life) are met in Jesus.

Both of them. Not just the hopes but also the fears.

And there is plenty of fear to go around.

How do we hold on to hope in these days when prices are rising, political vitriol is on a continued roll, wars rage in Ukraine and Yemen, and for every idyllic Christmas scene there's one of utter despair?

COVID still lingers.

Gun violence wages as it turns out that weapons of mass destruction aren't buried in the sands of the Middle East but are found in hands in classrooms and school hallways.

Clean water drenches lawns in parts of this country, but not a drinkable drop was found in Jackson, Miss., for months.

And this scene I began with, of good old Big Bill interrupting a sermon? I'd never try to do that these days as the scene would be more traumatizing than teachable with our collective nerves as shot as they are.

Yet here comes John the Baptizer again, with his wild-eyed wandering form, disrupting our hopes and our fears.

Every serene nativity scene should have John the Baptizer on the margins yelling at us, reminding us of this important truth: when it comes to God, it's not just about our hopes but also about our fears.

Christmas is not just about hopes. It is about fears too.

The fears of the poor and marginalized.

The fears of the young parents out there, like those Mary and Joseph faced.

The fears of the underemployed and outcast, like those the shepherds encountered.

And even the fears of the magi, who in their wealth had trouble finding Jesus—they looked for him in the halls of power, when he was in the halls of hay.

The fears that you and I have, friends.

Every Advent calendar should be broken in some way, allowing for the radical scandal of Jesus to

**John the  
Baptizer is  
a madman  
yelling from  
the fringes,  
“Prepare  
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is fixing! Get  
on the work  
crew!”**

disrupt our lives just a bit and remind us that God attends to both our hopes and our fears.

And we keep hope by knowing that God in Christ attends to not just the beauty of the world but also the broken places.

Especially them.



Illustration: St. John the Baptist Preaching by Mattia Preti/Wikipedia Commons



Actually, it's kind of funny: our Advent calendar at home is broken. We have this big one, given to us by a parishioner in Chicago, with hinged doors that open, big enough for little gifts to be put in them. The boys have played with it so much that door No. 18 broke off.

Though we could probably fix it, we haven't.

We won't.

Because it's now this visual reminder that, just steps away from the serenity of Christmas, there is still some brokenness—which is the reason for Jesus in the first place, right?

The eloquent author L.R. Knost has this wonderful quote that spoke to me this week as I was thinking of how John the Baptizer breaks up our Christmas sentimentalism every year. She writes:

*Do not be dismayed by the brokenness in the world.*

*All things break.*

*And all things can be mended.*

*Not by time, as they say, but with intention.*

*So go.*

*Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.*

*The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.*

John the Baptizer stands up in the middle of our Advent calendars, breaking their silent night, reminding us that hopes and fears are gathered together in Jesus, and points us back today away from the serenity of the nativity sets and the wonder of the sparkly lights to the broken world, not to bring us dismay—all things break—but to remind us of why God in Jesus shows up in the first place: to heal through intentional, extravagant, unconditional love.

And if we take seriously that God shows up in the flesh in the Christ child, we need to take seriously that Jesus, the light of the world, still shows up in that same way, in me and you.

I'm going to keep my Advent calendar broken.

Let's all keep our Advent calendars broke enough, beloved, to keep us awake to the reason that Jesus shows up at all: to tend to our hopes and our fears. No, not just our Advent calendars, all our calendars.

God still answers the pain of the world, not with a war cry but with a lullaby.

A baby's cry.

And let's get started with that intentional, extravagant, unconditional love thing.

No need to wait until Christmas. The calendar is broken, anyway, which makes every day Christmas and every day a moment for God to attend, yes, to our hopes but especially to our fears.

And that, ironically, gives some hope. †

John the  
Baptizer  
stands up in  
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in Jesus.



Photo: iStock.com/borchee



# Martin Luther on hope

By Kathryn A. Kleinhans

*In you alone, O God, we hope, and not in our own merit.  
We rest our fears in your good Word and trust your Holy Spirit.  
Your promise keeps us strong and sure;  
we trust the cross, your signature,  
inscribed upon our temples.*

*My soul is waiting for you, Lord, as one who longs for morning;  
no watcher waits with greater hope than I for your returning.  
I hope as Israel in the Lord,  
who sends redemption through the Word.  
Praise God for grace and mercy!*

When I think of Martin Luther and hope, what comes to mind first is these two stanzas of his hymn “Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 600). For Luther, hope was not a nice holiday sentiment or an expression of wishful thinking. Hope was the cry of the trusting heart!

The hymn is a musical setting of Psalm 130. Luther wrote it in 1523 and shared with a colleague that someone starting such a project would probably begin at the beginning, with Psalm 1. Instead, Luther chose first to put to music a psalm that expressed deep despair, deep longing and deep faith!

In his commentary on Psalm 130, Luther observed that hope and despair are opposites. In Romance languages, the words are intertwined—for example, in modern French, the word for hope is *espoir* and the word for despair is *désespoir*, with the prefix *dés* indicating lack of something. For Luther, though,

the relationship between hope and despair is not just a linguistic one but a theological one. He saw this relationship as dynamic, because it is precisely in the midst of despair that hope is created!

We live in a culture where hope is often confused with optimism. “I hope the weather is nice tomorrow,” we say, or “I hope my team wins the championship.” Luther’s reading of the Scriptures shifts our attention away from this transactional *hope that*. Instead, he invites us to *hope in*—“In you alone, O God, we hope.” Luther invites us to *hope for*—for the returning of the Lord “who sends redemption through the Word.”

In his commentary on Romans, Luther writes: “Hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for” and “the thing hoped for and the person hoping become one.”

When we hope that something will happen, the object of our hope is something outside ourselves. When we place our hope in the Lord, Luther believed, we are drawn more closely into the presence of God.

“Hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for” and “the thing hoped for and the person hoping become one.”

At the end of the letter to the Romans, Paul blesses his hearers and readers with these words: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Luther embraces this blessing, explaining that the “God of hope” is the very one who bestows hope upon us.

Praying or singing Luther’s words is a means through which the God of hope works the gift of hope deep into our own hearts. †

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