

# Celebrating Christmas before Dec. 25? Bah humbug!

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(RNS) It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas -- earlier and earlier every year. The evergreens at Rockefeller Center and the White House were decorated in November, radio stations started playing carols after Halloween, and stores have been promoting Christmas sales for months.

But at Nick Senger's house in Washington state, the carols and blinking lights are not welcome until well after Thanksgiving. Instead, family traditions include setting the table with purple placemats and an Advent wreath, and waiting until Dec. 25 to complete their Nativity display.

"When the kids wake up on Christmas morning, they always look to make sure Santa has brought baby Jesus," Senger joked.

Call it the "Battle for Advent" -- one that, for a few weeks at least, makes traditional Christians unlikely allies with atheists, secularists and non-Christians in the so-called "War on Christmas."

Advent advocates -- boosted this year by a pastoral letter from the Roman Catholic bishop of Utah and a homily by a media savvy Brooklyn deacon -- complain not only about holiday commercialization, but also about the loss of an important month of prayer in the rush to prematurely celebrate Christmas.

"Obviously, certain things have to be done before the end of Advent, but it is realistic to expect that Americans will want to celebrate both Advent and the season of Christmas," Bishop John Wester of Utah explained through a spokesperson. "These are two different seasons: Advent to prepare for the coming of Christ and Christmas to celebrate his coming."

The Rev. Karen Westerfield Tucker, a Boston University School of Theology professor, said her Methodist family always waited until Christmas Eve to decorate its tree, keeping it up for 12 days until Jan. 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. The Advent season, in contrast, is a time for Christians to patiently prepare for the coming of Christ and his baptism, she said.

"It was a time for repentance and solemn reflection, and certainly not an occasion for festive preparation," Tucker said. "In current practice, we've got the celebrations backwards -- before the events rather than afterwards."

Part of the problem stems from the Depression-era decision to move Thanksgiving up a week, getting the holiday shopping season -- heralded by Santa Claus at the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade -- started even earlier, said Martin Connell, author of "Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year."

"I was raised Catholic and there would be not one decoration in the house on Christmas Eve," he said. "It was a way to make Christmas more celebratory, so that the wonder of Jesus' birth was connected to the sparkling lights and all that."

Advent advocates say they understand that merchants depend on the holiday hype to get them through the end of the year, particularly

during an economic downturn; they also acknowledge that ceremonial Christmas tree lightings have become beloved events eagerly awaited as soon as the turkey, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie are polished off. Even devout Catholics get into the swing of the season a bit early: The U.S. headquarters of Opus Dei in New York City has a Christmas tree in its lobby, and the Vatican's tree in St. Peter's Square is lit in mid-December.

But churches, religious groups and families could benefit by slowing down and savoring the weeks leading up to Christmas as a unique and special season, Advent advocates say.

They can deck their halls with purple decorations, Advent calendars, Jesse trees -- which show the biblical lineage of Jesus -- and Advent wreaths featuring one candle for each of the four Sundays before Christmas. That's three purple candles as signs of penance and one rose candle for joy. And there are dozens of Advent hymns like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" to sing before it's time for "Joy to the World."

Observing Advent patiently would help relieve the stress that has become synonymous with the Christmas season, added Deacon Greg Kandra of Brooklyn, who writes a blog for Beliefnet called "The Deacon's Bench."

Busy people want to get their Christmas cards out, decorations up and shopping in, and Kandra doubts that "you can put the genie back in the bottle." But a compromise would be to postpone these kinds of actions until at least mid-December, if not Christmas Eve, and consider having holiday parties in early January, he said.

Senger, a Catholic school teacher, has started polling people on his blog, "Catholic School Chronicle," about steps they might take to "enter more fully into Advent." So far, most respondents say they feel

comfortable putting up Advent decorations and delaying Christmas displays, but the avoiding Christmas carols and parties before Dec. 25 remain unpopular.

"People are interested in things that don't interfere with traditions they already have," he said. "I wouldn't expect society to change, although society would benefit from Catholics who are more attuned to the Advent season and not so caught up in the buying and the rushing."

His family gradually begins putting up some Christmas decorations around mid-December, but Senger has decided to keep the radio dial away from Christmas stations until Dec. 24 this year. The children love the Advent traditions, but postponing carols has been surprisingly difficult, he noted.

"I think when we can finally sing them, they will really appreciate them," Senger said. "All this is to commemorate the waiting that the Israelites went through and to look ahead, that we're really waiting for some unknown point in time when Christ will come again."