

Lights out: Waiting in lonely exile

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

My gratitude for Advent has deepened over the years. I welcome the shorter days, and love the way the angled light of late November and early December makes everything look different. It seems to transform the world into a more promising place. Details are softer, colors pastel.

Coming as it does just after Thanksgiving with those magnificent hymns—“Now Thank We All Our God,” which theologian Robert McAfee Brown called the best all-purpose hymn in the book, and “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come”—Advent begins, for me, in gratitude. And the Advent hymns have become for me the richest theologically and most satisfying aesthetically of the year.

I’ve spent a good deal of time trying to explain to parishioners why we aren’t singing Christmas carols yet. I’m not sure I’ve made much headway on that front. The culture and the economy are already celebrating Christmas. The church I serve and the offices of the Christian Century are on opposite ends of Michigan Avenue, one of Chicago’s retail thoroughfares. And it has been Christmas on Michigan Avenue for more than a month. The first Christmas trees, Santa Clauses, ornaments and lights started to appear before Halloween. Our neighboring merchants count on Christmas for as much as 90 percent of the year’s business. They’re not taking chances. The earlier Christmas comes the better.

So it is a difficult transition from the festivities on the avenue to the muted sounds and shadows and somber colors inside the church.

O come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Not a very cheerful message—and the tune is at least 800 years old, a plainsong melody that feels like a Gregorian chant.

I love this hymn more each year. Israel mourning in lonely exile is not a bad image of the human condition this Advent, with Palestine and modern Israel both in dreadful captivity to violence and vengeance, and with Americans dying in Iraq at the hands of people they meant to liberate. It's a time to sit in the darkness, and ponder that darkness, "until the son of God appear."

The Fourth Gospel introduces the story of Jesus with a stunning metaphor: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." It is in the darkness that the light shines. That, finally, is why we don't sing the carols quite yet. We're going to sit in the darkness a while, waiting in lonely exile for God's promise to be kept again.