Back in the days of the Soviet Union, those who were of a certain status, would have two files kept on them. One of the files was filled with positive information and would be used if the person was going to be promoted. The other file was filled with damaging information, highlighting all of the individual’s indiscretions and would be used if that person was being demoted, shipped to Siberia or shot. Broadly speaking, neither of the files were false, they were just incomplete, telling only part of the story. For, as we know, we all have done good things and bad things. And with a little selective editing we can make a person out to be a saint or the spawn of Satan. And we all do this. We may not be as evil or methodical as the Soviets, but we all keep mental files on people and look for material to add to the good or the bad folder. And, while some individuals have more good than bad and others have more bad than good, the fact is that good and bad lives in all people. I bring this up not so you can start looking for your loved one’s faults, but rather to point out how our feelings color what we see. If we like someone, we will tend to focus on the characteristics that we like instead of those we do not and vice versa. And I think we can do the same with God. Not in terms that there are bad parts to God but rather in terms of ignoring the parts that we do not care for. We may not come out and say it directly perhaps giving it some code language, saying things about how we like the God of the New Testament and not the Old. But the net result in an incomplete picture of God. And nowhere is this incomplete picture more apparent than here in the season of Advent.

Not to be all conspiratorial, but Advent is the great fight between what the Christmas industrial complex wants you to see and what the season of Advent is all about. It is a struggle between what has traditionally been a penitential season and Frosty the Snowman. And if you are keeping score Frosty is winning. The current landscape looks like this: Advent has been subsumed by the secular season of Christmas and the actual season of Christmas (the time between Christmas Day and the Epiphany) has pretty much been forgotten. So, it is always a little weird when we show up on Advent I, having been fed a steady stream of treacly Christmas songs about our heart finding Christmas and then hear Jesus telling us that “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” I mean if there has been any mention of Jesus during this time of year by the prevailing culture, it has generally not involved darkened suns.

But obviously there is a reason why we have these readings today on Advent I, and the reason has to do with the preparatory nature of this season. We are preparing not just for the memory of Christ’s coming as the child in the manger but are also preparing for Christ coming again. And if you spend much time reading about Christ’s second coming it generally does not have a Jesus meek and mild type vibe to it. In fact, it often sounds pretty scary. While what we now call the Christmas season tends to be taken from the file entitled “God sooths and comforts us” the actual season of Advent comes from a more provocative file. Now, I understand why we like the easy listening version of God. We like it because it offers nothing challenging or disquieting but is rather all comfort and joy. But I think there is a reason that when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of Jesus the first words out of their mouths was “be not afraid.” Encounters with the actual God of the universe can be shocking. And to be good Christians we need to have a more complete picture of God than what the current consumerist nature of Christmas wants us to see. And because of this I think Advent is a very needed interruption in the commercial season of Christmas because it helps remind us of the otherness of God.

I was recently at my in-laws and picked up a book from my mother-in-law’s heretical bookshelf. I won’t bore you with too many details, but the basic hypothesis of the book was that God needs to catch up with us and how smart we humans have become. In support of the hypothesis the author went through a list of things we could no longer believe like the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. And the reason we could no longer believe in these things seemed to be because we now have a lot of technology like telescopes, cheese in a can, electrified swimming pools and so on. It all sounded rather creaky like a time traveling beatnik showing up and telling us to get with the times daddy-o. But this book points out that our objections to God will often be based on the whatever is groovy at the time – maybe God is too nice, maybe He’s too mean, maybe He shouldn’t convert water into wine and so on. And so every generation sets out to remake God in their own image. As a result, we now find that Advent has been muscled out of the picture because it has been determined that Christmas is the happiest time of the year. With our current priorities, we do not want anything within a month of Christmas to focus on anything besides joy and purchasing; meaning we need to make God cute and cuddly or better yet just erase him entirely and replace him with more innocuous things like a jolly old elf. But in so doing we end up with an insufficient understanding of God.

The first of the Ten Commandments reads, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.” We often think of other gods as figures like Zeus, Odin or Shazam, but really a god is anything we put in front of the God we are supposed to worship. God with a small “g” is anything we see as more important than God with a capital “G.” But, the strangeness of Advent serves as a reminder that God is not going to be domesticated or altered. It is a reminder that God will be God and that we are the ones to be changed, not Him. Christmas has become a season where we write out lists of stuff we want, but here on Advent we are reminded that it is God who is at the center of it all and that He may not look like we want Him to look. When God comes again it may not be all comfort and joy but will contain some judging of the living and the dead. That is why today we read, “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” This is not some arbitrary action on God’s part but is rather about separating those who have faith in Jesus and those who reject Him. Advent is about preparing our hearts and minds so that when Jesus comes, we will be ready.

Christmas has become a season of shaping God to our tastes, but the season of Advent reminds us that we are to be shaped into the image of God or the *imago Dei* if you want to get all Latin about it. This does not have to be depressing, but it does require some introspection. For as the great Christmas hymn tells us, “Let every heart prepare him room.” Advent reminds us to take some time and prepare some room so that we will be God’s this Christmas Day and forevermore.