

# *Holy Waiting*

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It happens almost every year. It's Thanksgiving weekend, and your husband has outdone himself in the kitchen, cooking a feast that Emeril would have envied; people will be talking about it for years. You wonder if you really could have gained five pounds in the last two days and you know that the answer is yes. It's been a warm and cozy holiday with family and dear friends gathered around the groaning board and lo, it is Sunday morning. Time to go to church and give thanks for so many blessings.

And then it happens. The lector turns to the Gospel of Matthew and reads:

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matthew 24:36-42; Advent 1, Year A)

It is, of course, the first week of Advent. And all of a sudden that nice warm glow dissipates into an unmistakable sense of dis-ease. You find yourself scowling at the preacher who, of course, never deviates from the lectionary. The mood is gone; the party's over.

Or perhaps it happens like this. Thanksgiving was lousy. It was just the two of you – or maybe just you – you're not speaking to your brothers, it's too close to the anniversary of your mother's death, and all of your friends – what few you have of them – are out of town. They probably wouldn't have invited you over anyway, and you're such a lousy cook you wouldn't have dared to invite them. And so goes another holiday. At least there's church – you can usually find a little comfort there. Except that it's the first Sunday of Advent, and you have to listen hard to hear some good news:

But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens shaken.

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. . . . But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will

come. . . (Mark 13:24-37, 32; Advent 1, Year B)

Or maybe it's not about Thanksgiving for you. Maybe you're the one who's been shopping since October and totally grooving on the Christmas carols in the mall. You can't help but wonder why church has to be so gloomy when everyone else is having such a good time. Why are we hearing about the end of the world instead of singing "Joy to the World"? What's the matter with enjoying a little Christmas spirit while we wait for the big day to arrive?

Advent. It's the liturgical season we love to hate. You have heard stories like these from folks in your church, or maybe you've told them (or secretly harbored them) yourself. The rest of the world, it seems, is reveling in a month-long celebration, feasting and shopping and going to parties from late November till December 25, while the church is wringing its hands about the end of time.

Advent, it seems, is one great tug-of-war. There is conflict between our biblical and liturgical instincts that insist, on the one hand, that we observe a period of preparation before the great feast of Christmas. We require time to reflect on the depth of our need for a Savior. And yet, on the other hand, we are desperate for some joy! We face the hard truths about ourselves and the world all throughout the year. What's wrong with a little merrymaking around the holidays? Besides, the kids are excited, the parents want to have a pageant, and everyone's eager to start singing all those great Christmas carols we only get to enjoy once a year. What's a pastor to do?

There is no season of the church year that is more fraught with tension than Advent – and no other time that reminds us so clearly of just how countercultural it is to be the church. The truth is that you don't have to scratch the surface very hard to see that it's not "the rest of the world" that's whooping it up, but only those with the cash (or the plastic) to do so. You don't have to look very far at all, in fact, to see why it makes a difference that we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" before we get around to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." A look at the morning paper or the evening news will do it; every canned food drive and Salvation Army bellringer reminds us, too.

I remember every time I see a woman I'll call Annie. Whether it's Advent or not, she reminds me of the holy waiting with which the church is charged. Annie sleeps outside, in doorways near the church building. Sometimes she meets us in the fellowship hall for lunch after worship, sometimes she joins us in the sanctuary. I don't think I've ever seen her sing, but whenever the Lord's table is spread she comes forward for a hunk of bread and some juice. One Sunday she came fresh from a beating, her face swollen and bruised and glistening with antibiotic salve. She was seeking food and also, perhaps, the murmuring voices and comforting hands of the women who hovered over her.

When I see Annie I remember why the world needs a Savior. Why we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Why we must sing "Come, thou long-expected Jesus." When I see Annie I remember why, at least once a year, the church must hear the words of Mary's song:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich empty away. (Luke 1:52-53)

I remember why Annie needs a Savior to release her from hunger and poverty and violence. I remember why I need a Savior to forgive me for allowing such things to happen to her. I remember why we all need a Savior to make the world as God intended it to be. I remember why we need Advent.

Yes, there is a tension here, and we feel it. On the one hand, there is rejoicing to be done! God's promise of a messiah has been fulfilled – we have heard the good news of Jesus' birth and we want to shout it out loud! There is cause for feasting and dancing and singing! The Savior *has* come, we have seen the light of Christ break through the darkness, and we are eager to remember and celebrate his birth.

On the other hand, we are all too aware that the new age inaugurated by Christ has not yet been made complete. While there is a great event to celebrate, there is so much to bewail about the state of the world. Jesus was born, to be sure, but he has yet to come again. In Advent, more than any other time of the church year, we feel the tension between repenting and rejoicing.

In his book, *Waiting for the Coming*, J. Neil Alexander notes this tension, as well. He asks, "*Should we relieve this stress even if we thought we could?* and, *Could we relieve this stress even if we thought we should?*" In other words, "do we *relieve* or *live into* the tension of Advent?"<sup>1</sup> In answering, he takes his cue from the church's liturgical history. He notes that in Gaul, where some of the earliest Advent traditions seem to have emerged, the season had "a Lent-like character"; it was a time of introspection and penitence. In Rome, however, quite a different tone developed. Instead of Gaul's purples and blacks, the liturgical colors were white and gold, and the season took on a quality of joyful expectation. Throughout the centuries, in various times and places, it is possible to see both of these emphases in Christians' Advent observances. The church, it seems, has never been able to settle for one interpretation or the other – Advent was either a time of eager anticipation or one of eschatological dread. In the end, Alexander decides that this is at it should be, for both represent a part of God's revelation in Christ.<sup>2</sup> And so we choose to live into the tension of Advent – to throw ourselves into joyful longing for Christ's coming, giving thanks for the overwhelming gift of grace we have already received and – at the same time – to confess our failure to live as God intended and to pray for mercy in the face of the final judgment that will bring about the completion of all creation.

These are not mutually exclusive impulses, as Alexander points out. For even as we confess our desperate need for a Savior – even as we are sure that we could not stand in the face of God's righteousness – we know that the Christ for whom we yearn has already come, that salvation is promised, and that one great day all God's children will be gathered up and a new heaven and a new earth will be our eternal reality. The truth we experience in Advent, then, is that the first and second comings of Christ "are inextricably intertwined, the warp and woof of the weeks before Christmas." As Alexander puts it, "Advent is that point in our proclamation and prayer when past and future meet in our experience of the present: *came, coming, here!*"<sup>3</sup>

A recent paraphrase of the Magnificat brings the point home. In Rory Cooney's "Canticle of the Turning," we remember how Mary sang:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great,  
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who  
wait.

You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not  
spurn.  
So from east to west shall my name be blest. Could the world be about to  
turn?

But we don't just remember that one day long ago these words were attributed to a young woman who would become *Theotokos*. Her song also gives us a vision of God's future:

From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn;  
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.

Again, this is not only a proclamation of future hope, but also a claim for today, as is made clear by the hymn's refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring, Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!<sup>4</sup>

This is a present happening! Christ is in our midst as we remember his coming, renew our hope, and act out God's vision of the world to come, here and now. This is what Laurence Stookey calls "living at the intersection of time and eternity." The past becomes a real and living part of our present, for as we remember the birth of Christ so long ago, "the Risen One holds all time in unity, and by the Holy Spirit brings all things to our remembrance in this way."<sup>5</sup> And so we sing Advent songs in the present tense: "'Sleepers, wake!' A voice astounds us; The shout of rampart guards surrounds us: 'Awake, Jerusalem, arise!'" This baby was not only born long ago, but is born to us again, today. It is the same sort of phenomenon we experience whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper. We do not just remember a meal of Jesus long ago, but we share it ourselves. In this *anamnesis* the past is made present as Christ meets us in bread and wine.

In the same way, Stookey explains, the future is also brought into our present (*prolepsis*). By the power of the Holy Spirit we can envision the coming reign of God; in our worship and our work we act out the promises of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup> It happens whenever we baptize. Each time water is poured out we profess that all are made one in Christ – there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – we are all equally honored and anointed. It's the promise we have received for the world to come; it's the one we act out in the sacrament and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in every personal and political encounter.

Here in Advent, memory and hope are heightened. The infant Jesus inhabits our lives, and the Christ who is coming again gives us glimpses of the world as it will be. It happened to Nora Gallagher when she was least expecting it. "In the midst of the Christmas rush – shopping, wrapping presents, sending cards – Advent breaks in on me," she writes. "I hear the voice of John." She is helping to serve a meal at the soup kitchen hosted by her church. It is a special meal, a feast they share just before Christmas. And they've got the works! Turkey and stuffing and gravy, green beans

and salad and homemade cranberry sauce. The room is full. Most of the guests are men, but there is one table of women and children near the station where Gallagher is working. She sees them, and then it happens.

I scoop the salad, put it on a plate, put the plate on a tray. At one point, I turn from the salad to face the room. It happens without warning, just as I turn. I see the people in the room in slow motion, as if they are moving through molasses. Their faces are shining. A middle-aged woman walks across the room holding in front of her a plate piled with food; she smiles at the man she is about to serve. Between them, for a second, I see a cord drawn taut, a connection of light. Her face is lit up. She places the food in front of him, sways slightly, as if she were onboard a ship, then rights herself and walks away. One of the women with the children looks up. Our eyes meet. She points at her daughter, who is eating a huge plate of turkey and stuffing, and we both laugh.

This is her Advent vision. “We prepare by this,” she says, “by falling down before each other.”<sup>7</sup> There, for a moment, holiday chaos and poverty’s weariness collide, and the collision causes something to break open – some unexplainable joy, some glimpse of heaven, some bright hope where none was expected to shine. The memory of a holy birth and the hope of promises fulfilled, lived in this unexpected present moment. It is a sighting as she leans into the kingdom of God.

Perhaps it is fitting that Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year, for leaning into the kingdom is what the Christian life is all about. After a long season of ordinary time, when we deepen our understanding of God’s past dealings with us and sharpen our vision of the reign of God that is to come, we proclaim that Christ indeed is King, that he will reign over all of creation in mercy and justice and love. The end of the liturgical year is its beginning, for that triumphant proclamation is enough to make us yearn with increased longing for the kingdom to come. Yes, that’s the way we want the world to be! That is the Messiah we crave! Come, Lord Jesus – *maranatha*! And so we enter into another Advent, another season of holy waiting.

This holy waiting is not passive, but active, for Advent is a time of journeying together from the world’s deep darkness to the dawning of Christ’s light. It is, as Neil Alexander says, less about “the reason for the season” than it is about renewing our real, deep hope for the world.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of four weeks the Advent texts exhort us to watch with expectancy, for “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed (Romans 13:11). As we watch and wait, we are called to repent, that we might be ready when Christ does come to take us all home and make peace and justice the way of the world. Praying for a new heaven and a new earth, we rejoice as we claim the promised vision:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,  
 so that you will not bear reproach for it.  
 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time.  
 And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
 and I will change their shame into praise  
 and renown in all the earth.  
 At that time I will bring you home,  
 at the time when I gather you;  
 for I will make you renowned and praised  
 among all the peoples of the earth,  
 when I restore your fortunes  
 before your eyes, says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:17-20; Advent 3, Year C)

Then, as Advent moves toward Christmas, and we hear the joy and hope of Mary's song, we make our final preparations to receive the One who is born, again, for our sakes and for the sake of the world. As we progress through the weeks of Advent – watching, repenting, rejoicing, and preparing – we see the two emphases the church has always held in balance. We tell the truth about ourselves and our need for a Savior; we come face to face with the world's sorry state, and our part in it, and ask for forgiveness and renewal. And, at the same time, we give thanks and praise because we know the promise has been made and its fulfillment is sure: Christ has come and he will come again.

As we live into the tension of Advent, both repenting and rejoicing, we find ourselves at odds with the other calendars that lay claim to our lives. That is part of the tension, too – embracing the cycle of the church year brings us into conflict, again and again, with the cycles of the school year, the civic year, the church program year, and the cycles of our personal lives. And yet this tension is not defeating, but life-giving. Nora Gallagher puts it this way:

I am here preparing for a Eucharist in Advent, living by a calendar that runs parallel to my Day-Timer, a counterweight, one time set against another. The church calendar calls into consciousness the existence of a world uninhabited by efficiency, a world filled with the excessiveness of saints, ashes, smoke, and fire; it fills my heart with both dread and hope. It tells of journeys and mysteries, things “seen and unseen,” the world of the almost known. It dreams impossibilities: a sea divided into, five thousand fed by a loaf and two fishes, a man raised from the dead.

My daily calendar reminds me that what I experience in the world of faith must be measured against what I see, what is happening around me. . .

In “The Production of the World,” his essay on Van Gogh, John Berger writes: “For an animal its natural environment and habitat are a given; for a man [sic] . . . reality is not a given: it has to be continually sought out, held – I am tempted to say salvaged.”

Faith is the name I put to the seeking out, the holding, the salvage operation.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the “salvage operation” of Advent faith calls us to recognize God’s reality – in the memory of a Savior who was born to live and die as one of us – in the hope in this Christ who will come again – and in the sure conviction that, here and now, “the world is about to turn!” This is our holy waiting, full of repentance and rejoicing. If we’re watching, we might even have sightings of our own as we lean into the coming reign of God.

### Notes

1. J. Neil Alexander, *Waiting for the Coming: The Liturgical Meaning of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), 23-24.
2. Alexander, 8, 20.
3. Alexander, 25, 26.
4. Rory Cooney, “Canticle of the Turning,” in *Gather* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1994), 376.
5. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 32.
6. Stookey, 32
7. Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen. A Year Lived in Faith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 26-27.
8. Alexander, 26-27.
9. Gallagher, 3-4.