

Ready and Waiting

Leigh Campbell-Taylor
Atlanta, Georgia

The knock on my dressing-room door was not angry; neither was the face that appeared when the door opened. And the greeting that followed was deliberately jolly, though unmistakably wry: “Ah! The late Leigh Campbell...” The speaker, an esteemed theatre director from the UK, was Artist in Residence for the semester and had directed this college production. And during that evening’s performance, when the stage lights had come up after intermission, instead of there being two actresses present on stage, there had been only one; I had been missing, requiring my unlucky scene partner to improvise all by herself. That is why, shortly after the night’s final curtain call, our director came upstairs to check in with me.

In his crisp British accent, he asked if perhaps there had been some technical problem. No, I had simply stopped paying attention. I miserably explained that I had been in a distant part of the building, and so, encumbered as I was by a powdered wig that made me over 6 feet tall and a panniered gown that made me almost 5 feet wide (thank you, eighteenth-century fashion!), even after I heard my stranded-alone-on-stage classmate desperately inventing a soliloquy, I was unable to reach the set quickly enough to render any prompt remedy.

My director found this hilarious and kindheartedly responded with tales of infamous missed entrances committed by truly great actors. Only after he had nudged me past my mortified tears did he add, “Look at it this way: from now on, you will always be ready *and* waiting.” And I was. For every remaining performance of that show, I was ready and waiting. And in every show since then, I have always been stationed in the wings well before my cue beckons me onto the stage. One thing I learned that long-ago night is how vital it is to be ready *and* waiting.

Every year, “waiting” is a theme of Advent: it is our season of waiting for that which has already occurred but is not yet fully realized. This year’s Advent, however—the Advent that will occur during this unprecedented, surreal, challenging, extraordinary (insert your own adjective here) span of time—this Advent insists upon a different understanding of waiting. Advent 2020 invites us to be ready *and* waiting.

Because this past year has been such an epic year, I want to briefly revisit how it began: this year began with none of us remotely ready or waiting for a global pandemic or for a definitive confrontation with the insidious sin of racism. Think back to late February: while news outlets reported on a virus spreading far away in Asia and then in Italy, there was only cursory coverage of the fact that Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black man in Georgia, had been shot to death by three white men, none of whom had been arrested. Even if we had been paying full attention to these then-small stories, we would not have been ready and waiting for the avalanche of developments that ensued.

Do you remember the very first day of March? I do. It was a communion Sunday, and my staff and I suddenly found ourselves scrambling for hand sanitizer that could be passed down the pews before the bread and cup were shared. Circumstances had required us to make that decision so swiftly that our ushers and elders were not fully

ready and waiting for this strange addition to the sacrament.

One wild week later, we launched livestreamed worship. My head had not stopped spinning—a televangelist?! me?!—before circumstances next required me to conduct our presbytery’s first-ever virtual congregational meeting.

I was not ready for any of this. Moreover, there was no opportunity for waiting. The situation had crash-landed on top of us all, generating a relentless frenzy of best-guessing and adapting and innovating and persevering. Speaking for my denomination, I will note that we Presbyterians—a people dubbed “the frozen chosen,” famous for our dogmatic determination to do things “decently and in order”—had never imagined we would ever have to make and unmake and remake so many decisions on the fly! Whatever your denomination, you too had to bushwhack your way through some version of this disorienting landscape. God bless you.

As April unfolded, the relentless frenzy was replaced by relentless waiting; waiting became an endurance test. And we were not ready for all that waiting: waiting for the curve to flatten and waiting for news of a vaccine, waiting for definitive guidance and waiting for coherent leadership, waiting to get out of lockdown and waiting to get into the grocery store, waiting for testing and waiting for results, waiting to reopen, to reunite, to return, waiting for some *new* normal instead of merely some ever-shifting *now* normal.

Amid all that frenzy and then all that waiting, many of us did not find time to grieve the March 13 killing of unarmed Breonna Taylor by police officers. (I confess I assumed that hers, like countless other Black lives, would soon be forgotten in our society’s insatiable news cycle.) Whether or not her unjust death was on your list of preoccupations as the world was waiting for May to unfold, we were in no way ready for the anguish and horror and scathing truth that erupted when George Floyd’s murder finally tripped a wire in our national psyche.

Thus it is that two monumental crises, the unanticipated explosion of Covid-19 and the overdue confrontation with America’s original sin, have rippled across the entire globe, catching us all—as the church, as spiritual leaders, and as individual disciples—anything but ready and waiting. How then do we meet Advent 2020? How do we now balance the ecclesial call to “waiting” with the protest signs we must neither forget nor ignore, the signs that proclaim the biblical truth, “Justice can’t wait”?

Due to this publication’s production deadlines, I am working on this article during the summer. Between the time when I write these words and the time when you and your congregation will read the words of Advent liturgies, so much will have happened:

- + schools will have resumed classes in some manner (Right now, students and parents are *waiting* with eagerness and with anxiety to know what that will look like, even as my husband and other educators *ready* themselves for an exhausting array of possibilities.);
- + the world will have been hit—or not—by the second wave of coronavirus (Right now, we are all *waiting* with dread or with derision, even as hospitals and public health officials *ready* themselves for worst-case scenarios.);
- + churches will have made further decisions about in-person worship and other activities (Right now, parishioners are *waiting* with excitement and with wariness to return to beloved patterns, even as pastors *ready* themselves for more new challenges.);
- + Christians will have experienced an All Saints Day of particular poignancy (Right

now, grieving families are *waiting* to fully memorialize their lost loved ones, even as caregivers sorrowfully *ready* themselves for additional avoidable deaths.);

+ America will have made it to the far side of a historically divisive election (Right now, voters are *waiting* for assurances regarding free and fair processes, even as the two main political parties *ready* themselves for their conventions;

+ and tragically, communities of color will almost surely have suffered elevated rates of coronavirus, elevated rates of death, and elevated rates of voter suppression. But maybe, just maybe, justice will prove itself ready and waiting to roll down like mighty waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Please, O God, may it be so!

I put together that list of late-2020 confluences of “waiting” and “ready” as a demonstration that it is possible to be getting ready even while waiting. And in Advent 2020, I wonder if that deliberately split focus is what we are called to.

Scripture supports the coordinated effort of being ready *and* waiting. As I think about Advent and scripture, I cannot help but think first of Mary, the mother of God. When we meet her, she, like every faithful Jew, is waiting for the Messiah. What sets Mary apart is that, along with a tiny circle of Spirit-strengthened family members—Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah—Mary knows that this long-awaited Messiah is, in fact, the child she carries within her womb. And so Mary, as she ponders in her heart, is also preparing in her body. As she is waiting, she is actively getting ready for the Incarnation of God.

While we may not be able to bear God within us in the particular way of Mary, we can expect more of ourselves than merely a gentle, mildly spiritual understanding of Advent “waiting.” We can instead require ourselves to commit to active preparation for the reign of God. (You might start by reading—or rereading—Dr. King’s justly famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, looking for this quote and other passages that insist on a re-examination of waiting: “Time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do what is right.”) We can accept that our integrity as Christ’s followers is inseparable from our willingness to lovingly sacrifice for those long marginalized; we can do the hard work of learning to be faithful sisters and brothers to no less than the Messiah Himself; we can emulate Mary in lending our physical selves to God’s inbreaking reign. Whether we are taking a stand in the streets or in the pulpit, we can practice a more embodied Advent that will help us to be ready *and* waiting for God.

Beyond Mary’s story, if you explore biblical references to “waiting,” it becomes clear that waiting is something of a theme in the Hebrew Bible. The well-known instruction to “wait for the Lord” often comes across as a directive to tranquility. And that understanding is not completely incorrect; some Hebrew terms that get translated as “wait” are words that connote quietude, patience, restfulness. Many ancient words of waiting, however, are less serene. Often they connote the more active concept of eager longing and hopeful expectation. These are the threads many of us have historically picked up for Advent, hearing and repeating themes of Advent anticipation, using phrases like “standing on tiptoe” that fit with the tinsel terrain which surrounds us each December, harmonizing nicely with the childlike excitement we associate with the Christmas mornings to which Advent delivers us.

But other instances of “waiting” are more active still, more demanding of bodily engagement. These words partner with terms for justice and righteousness and truth;

they ring with petitions for change. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly calls us to waiting, but often not to some purely passive state.

Turning the page to the New Testament, I am struck by how Jesus does *not* wait. This makes sense: He is, after all, the One whom all that ancient waiting has been about, so why would He need to wait? And indeed, instead of waiting, Jesus blazes forth, a child teaching in the synagogue! Instead of waiting, Jesus plunges in, baptized by someone not worthy to touch His sandals. (Yes, the lowliness of we who baptize has quite a lineage!) Instead of waiting, Jesus forges ahead, healing on the sabbath. Jesus does not wait because salvation is not waiting; in Him, salvation is *at hand*. Jesus does not wait because justice cannot wait.

Now, Jesus does preach about waiting, but mostly in terms of being ready *and* waiting: the bridesmaids put on notice to be mindful of their oil supply, the servants reminded to stay alert for the landowner's return. Jesus is telling all His disciples to be ready and waiting.

As is also clear in the Epistles, our ancestors in the faith continued the ancient prophets' practice of awaiting the coming of God. Like them, we know God will come because God has promised to come. God's promised reign of peace—that reality which we have spent previous Advents waiting for in liturgical correctness—is coming. While we are waiting for it, we must also be getting ready for it.

That can seem daunting (Jesus often is daunting!), but we can do this, y'all! Last spring, we were not ready and waiting for much of anything. We were not well-equipped and prepared to enter the fray. No! The fray fell upon us and engulfed us. But, by the grace of God, we made it through. We have found ways to preach and teach and do mission and offer care and create fellowship and work for God's shalom. And thus we now know ourselves to be disciples of greater creativity, capacity, and courage than we ever imagined during any prior Advent. And that is a good thing. Because justice can't wait.

This may be the point at which we need to be reminded that this is not on us alone. The bringing in of God's reign is work that belongs to God. God blesses us by inviting our participation and encouraging our contribution, but, thanks be to God, this is a Divine endeavor far larger and stronger and better than any one of us.

And that leads me back to the anecdote with which I began this article. An actor who is ready *and* waiting has committed herself to everyone else in the cast and crew, grateful to know that she is not alone; she has rehearsed not merely her lines, but her connections to all the other participants and to the overarching creative project that brings them together; she knows her particular part and she knows that, although her part is not the whole, it is crucial to the whole. An actor who is ready *and* waiting is not merely in place on time. She is also prepared and paying attention; she has done the work and is eager to put it to good use. What's more, she is open to the unfolding moment: when she steps onto the stage and into the scene, she brings not only preparedness but flexibility and responsiveness. In live theatre, everything has been rehearsed and yet anything can happen.

Might that be a model for Advent, especially Advent 2020? Year after year, we have rehearsed Advent: its vocabulary and its rituals, its pericopes and its practices. We know our part. And yet anything can happen. Surely the past year has taught us that! Seismic shifts happened in 2020: unimagined death happened; global quarantine happened; massive unemployment happened; truth-telling happened; clean air

happened; repudiation of sin happened. Enormous changes happened for which we were not ready and waiting. But God has been with us through it all, and God will redeem it all; it is for that purpose that God comes to us.

By shifting from “waiting” to “ready *and* waiting,” we become more open to God, more empowered to prepare the way for the One who has come and is coming. Like an attentive actor (or like the Mary of that first Advent season), we can be available to give ourselves to God’s great purposes. And that matters. Because as 2020 rolls into 2021, justice can’t wait.