

THE TRUTH ABOUT ADVENT

What is the real message of Advent? Who is waiting for whom?

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Waiting. This is a popular Advent word. We sing about waiting for the Lord; we sew the word onto banners; we try to instill in the children we teach some sense of waiting for Jesus while they wait so achingly for the arrival of Santa Claus. But waiting is waiting. I am doing it now as I write this—sitting in the laundry room waiting for my clothes to dry. And I spent the morning waiting for an important phone call. Waitings like these—waiting in line, waiting for sleep to come, waiting for guests to arrive—do not seem to be the stuff of Advent songs, prayers, and banners. But, it's what we do with our waiting that leads us to an essential truth about Advent. I would like to share with you here two experiences that helped me focus on this essential truth.

When my niece, Jill, was two years old, I was caring for her one day, Jill is the child of farm folk and began learning from birth about crops, animals, and farm machinery. On this particular day I was reading while she sat on the floor playing farm, I glanced her way every few minutes and watched and heard her making the motions; and sounds to plow with her toy tractor, to round up her plastic animals, and to plant seeds to grow corn and beans. She really caught my attention, though, when she became completely quiet. I looked over and saw her sitting cross-legged with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, staring at the floor, "I thought you were playing farm," I said. "I am," she replied. "This is the part where you just watch and wait for the crops to grow."

The stuff of Advent. In his Epistle, Saint James writes about patience, saying, "See the farmer await the yield of the soil" (James 5:7). I heard this message anew from "the mouth of a babe,"

More recently, I learned about waiting from a little green bird. I made some discoveries about the truth of Advent. While it is a time of waiting, a time to commemorate the longing expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, (Old Testament), and a time to look ahead



to the end time, the truth that came to me about Advent was that "we" are not the ones doing the waiting at all!

The bird that taught me this lived in my house for three years. She was never completely healthy, which is why I brought her home in the first place. Last spring, after much effort to save her life, she died of her chronic illness. But for the three years that she lived with me she taught me many things about birds, about myself, and about God.

For the first five weeks after bringing her home, I spent an hour each morning sitting beside her cage holding a piece of apple and waiting for her to trust me enough to accept the offered treat from me. She went from there to looking for me, approaching me first, and even flying from room to room to find me. Each step in the taming of this bird involved waiting. I discovered patience in myself that I did not know was there. I grew quieter and more centered because of the daily stillness that I imposed upon myself in order to tame her. And in the taming of this bird, in the waiting and the quiet patience, it occurred to me that this is how God is with me, with us. Is it we who are waiting for the coming of the Lord? Or is it, in fact, the Lord our God, who is waiting for us?

To my bird, I was a person with power, who gave her all she needed, but who could also take her life if I chose. It was no wonder that it took so long to tame her, or that to the end of her life she was never completely at ease in my presence, even when she sought to be with me. Knowing her nature and small size, I took no

offense at her unwillingness to trust me; I did not get angry at the painfully slow process of taming.

All of these reflections gently called me to some realizations about myself and God. "So, this is how it is", I said to God one day. "Knowing my nature and my limitations you take no offense at my slowness or even my unwillingness to trust you. You wait, day by day, for me to move closer to you, and you understand how it happens that I so often distance myself from you again after a time. You wait patiently for me to accept and enjoy the gifts you offer me: "You await a time when I will recognize your face more readily in the faces around me."

I am always surprised at the patience, love, and forgiveness I experience from God. So many times, I have turned back to God after distancing myself only to find that God is there, waiting for me!

Advent. Waiting. We do await the coming of God in history, mystery, and majesty; but look around. The Lord, too, is waiting. Advent belongs to our God. If God seems very silent, perhaps this is the time for "just watching and waiting" for us to grow. If God seems very distant, perhaps this is the time for us to move toward the love that is being offered to us. This is the great truth about Advent: It is God who is waiting for us.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think about the waiting you do from day to day. What does it tell you about your own personal Advent waiting for the coming of God?
- What do you think that God is awaiting—right now—in your mutual relationship? What is God offering that you have been hesitant to accept as a gift?
- How can the spirituality of waiting be conveyed to the children you teach? What growth and response are you watching for and waiting for from them?