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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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Sometimes, Waiting Is Hard

Advent is a word I was unfamiliar with as a child growing up in my Baptist tradition. But in my years with the Mennonites, I became familiar with the ritual of lighting candles on the Advent wreath in anticipation of Christ's nativity.

Advent, I learned, meant arrival, but intrinsic to that word was the waiting, the anticipation, and the longing of God's people for his appearance and especially his deliverance. As a little boy, I relished that expectant hope as the calendar slowly edged forward to Christmas.

SOMETIMES, WAITING IS HARD

I think most children find waiting for the climax of Christmas morning difficult... but they may also enjoy the waiting itself as they experience the whole season as a wonderland of

lights, sweets and intoxicating anticipation.

Still, in our culture and in our lives, waiting can be terribly hard. On top of the frenetic pace and exhausting demands of our 21st century society, the Christmas season adds a new dimension of scurrying. I become more sensitive to long traffic lights, slow download speeds and snail-paced checkout lines. I get more demanding of others—where's my fast-food order? Why hasn't he replied to my text yet? When is she picking me up? Checking my watch every two minutes.

Beyond these trivialities, waiting for important news can be excruciating. Applications are brutal... applying for jobs, applying for housing, applying for school, applying for work permits or scholarship funds or debt forgiveness. Waiting!

And then there's waiting for

medical results. What did the lab say? A second opinion? How long? Three weeks? Good grief! Waiting can be awfully hard.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WAITING

We may experience serious negative effects of waiting in our body, soul and spirit:

- We may have a spike in anxiety that affects our sleep and our appetite.
- Waiting may also trigger feelings of frustration, which is really a kind of anger, especially at whatever or whoever we see as prolonging or blocking our path.
- Chronic waiting may walk us into grief and groaning.
- Eventually, waiting may settle into depression and despair.
- We may even lapse into a hard cynicism or self-defeating victim narrative.

Cries of despair echo around the globe as so many wait in

apparent futility for relief from chronic poverty and illness, constant hostility and continual war.

HOW DO WE WAIT?

How shall we respond to the moans of those whose waiting has ground them down?

First, I think we must *be with them*. The promise of a virgin-born child named Emmanuel was to say that God is not distant or deaf to our groaning prayers. He is “God with us”... and not in some magical misty fog of abstracted presence. No, he is with us, embodied as those who willingly co-suffer with the broken. It means weeping with those who weep rather than rushing to fix them with empty platitudes. When we hear their story, we bear it with them, as God-in-Christ did and does.

Second, we do our best *not* to silence their lament. The complaints of those who wait in grief can be messy and it’s tempting to correct them when we hear B.S. about God or the world or themselves spewing out of their mouths. But those toxic beliefs need a wait out, need to be given voice as part of the detox.

It’s important to practice nonjudgmental listening in the presence of our unrattled God. And we need to offer up our own honest laments without fear.

Third, we *join in the waiting* with a call for deliverance, committing to not growing bored or jaded and simply moving on when the wait seems too long. “How long?!” is the legitimate, weeping cry of many in our world today. Let’s cry out in prayers of solidarity with and for them.

SOMETIMES, WAITING IS GOOD

So far, I’ve emphasized how difficult waiting can be. But waiting is also incredibly important to human development. I recently brainstormed the positive effects of waiting with a congregation in Regina, Canada. They offered the following list of positive impacts of waiting.

- Waiting develops patience, endurance and resilience.
- Waiting creates longing and increases expectancy.
- Waiting builds gratitude for what we’ll receive.
- Waiting prepares our hearts and readies our hands to receive.

- Waiting increases our capacity to receive... enlarging our hearts.
- Waiting cleanses us as we let go of lesser desires or attachments.
- Waiting deepens faith in the goodness of God despite delays.

Many times when I or others are waiting on God, we complain that it’s going too slow and ask why God can’t pick up the pace a bit. The sense I’ve had again and again is that God is going as fast as we can. He longs for us to receive the grace that’s already ours but can only deliver that to the degree we can receive it. In other words, he’s honoring the pace of our growth.

WHEN WAITING BECOMES ARRIVAL

The good news is that our waiting gives way to arrival. Advent reminds us that while we wait for our Savior to return, he has also already come. This was Simeon’s experience when Mary and Joseph brought Christ to the Temple as an infant (Luke 2:25-32):

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

Yes, many of us wait to restore the broken places of our lives, and we wait for his appearing to restore all things, but we also proclaim his arrival. Christian worship is of Emmanuel—“*God with us*,” not “*God was with us*”—present tense! God’s children cry out, “*Come, Lord Jesus*,” but we also welcome Christ’s presence here and now. And whenever two or three gather in his name, our Advent waiting becomes Advent arrival. □

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