

Advent 3: A Community of Waiting and Expectation

Ruth Haley Barton

“As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals...’”

Third Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:7-18

“At times the strength of spiritual community lies in the love of people who refrain from getting caught in the trap of trying to fix everything for us, who pray for us and allow us the pain of our wilderness, our wants, so that we might become more deeply grounded in God.”

Rosemary Dougherty

All of the characters in the early chapters of Luke are waiting. Zechariah is waiting in the silence of his unbelief. Elizabeth is waiting in the place of her barrenness where God is now performing a miracle. Mary is waiting in utter openness to the will of God that is unfolding in her life beyond her control. John the Baptist has been waiting in the wilderness and growing strong in spirit until it is time to enter into his public ministry. Simeon and Anna have ordered their whole lives around waiting and praying and looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. The people of Israel have been waiting for the Messiah for so long that they were willing to give the honors to anyone who seemed to come with a fresh wind of the Spirit.

This is a close-knit community of people who are together in the waiting. In fact, we see here a delicate web of relationships that is structured to wait and watch and receive the presence of God as it comes. And somehow they seem to know that waiting is not to be done alone. Zechariah, when left speechless by his encounter with the angel,

goes home to be with his wife and wait. When Mary finds out she is pregnant she goes immediately to live out her waiting time with Elizabeth. John the Baptist emerges from his wilderness time willing to engage his community and guide them in their waiting. Simeon's and Anna's waiting has been shaped by the rhythms of worship in community that have anchored the Israelites for centuries. Because of their faithfulness to these rhythms, they are there to welcome the Christ-child when he comes.

God is doing something different in each person's life through the waiting but it is the experience of waiting that they all share in common.

The Essence of Spiritual Community

This is a compelling picture of community. One of the truest expressions of spiritual community is found among those who are able to wait together—for what is needed in our individual lives and in our lives together. But there is real discipline involved. In the waiting place we resist the Messiah complex—that urge to rush in with easy answers and be the savior of the world. We resist the desire that others have to crown us as the savior of their world, as John's community wanted to do. In the community of waiting, we stay with each other in the unfixed places of our lives, the empty and barren places, the places of our truest and thorniest questions. *We seek God in those places* even when it is so tempting to run the other way. When it is necessary, we endure the silence of each other's unbelief, waiting for the dawn from on high to break upon us. In the community of waiting we support one another in saying yes to the will of God as it unfolds in our lives—even (and most particularly) when it is unfolding in ways that we cannot predict or control.

No wonder the call to community is one of the most difficult and demanding elements of the spiritual life! But is not the Church of Christ, in its deepest essence, a community of those who wait? Is not the Church of Christ a community of those who wait together for the dawn from on high to break upon us in the places where we are sitting in darkness?

Waiting for the Dawn

Just this week, I saw a sunrise that was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen. Right here in the little town where I live. I was bleary-eyed, still in my slippers and pajamas driving my daughter to school. I had no expectation of seeing such a spectacular dawning to this particular new day but there it was. Orange and pink, alive with mist and fire. All of a sudden I was totally awake, arrested by this unexpected gift to the senses. It was so beautiful that it was hard to know how to best take it in. My teenage daughter was with me in the car so I babbled on about it to her for a few sentences—wanting to share it with someone—but what teenager can enter into the beauty of a sunrise at 7:00 on a school day? But a sunrise like that deserves some sort of celebration!

Here is my point: when we are waiting in a place of darkness or questioning in our own lives, not only do we need help to stay in that waiting place, we are also going to want someone with us when the dawn begins to break. We are going to want someone who knew how dark it was to be able to notice the first glimmers of light and to marvel with us at the dawn when it is full blown. Like Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, we are going to want someone with us who can receive our canticles of praise and thanksgiving and truth.

Perhaps one of our questions during Advent should be who waits with you? Who knows the place in your life where you are sitting in darkness and waiting for the light of Christ to dawn? Who is waiting and watching with you so that when the light begins to dawn, you can see it together?

This Advent season, make sure that you are a part of this community of waiting. Make sure that someone knows where it is in your life that you are waiting for a manifestation of Christ's presence. That way, when the dawn from on high breaks into your life, you can see it together and share in its power and its beauty. Together your souls can magnify the Lord and your spirits can rejoice in God's salvation.

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