

Advent: Training in Waiting

Ruth Haley Barton

“Waiting is the hidden preparation through which God puts his ministers. We neglect it to our own peril.” --Richard Foster

The seasons of the church year are meant to teach us something about the spiritual life that we need to learn. Beyond mere information *about* the spiritual life, they offer us the opportunity to “live into” aspects of the spiritual life that we might not otherwise choose or even know how to choose. They give us a chance to *practice* some of the key disciplines of the Christian life and to do it together as a community of faith.

Advent, in particular, is a season that teaches us to do something that is very hard for us to do: wait. It teaches us how to wait for the Advent or arrival of Christ into our world, not just way back then in Biblical times, but now—in those places where we long for his presence and need his intervention.

Waiting for Christ’s coming into the places of our lives where we need him most *right now* ushers us into a special kind of waiting that is alert and watchful, full of anticipation and yet patient. The prophetic witness of John the Baptist calls us to become intentional about creating the conditions that ease Christ’s coming into our lives—alone and together. To remove whatever hindrances and obstacles there might be to Christ’s presence. To make straight whatever is crooked *in us*. To smooth out the rough places so that the salvation of God can become evident in our own lives.

The Wilderness of Waiting

Waiting presents us with quite a conundrum—especially for those of us who are leaders. On the one hand, most of us leader-types are not very good at it. We want

what we want and we want it yesterday. We want it on our own terms, just like we envisioned it. On the other hand, waiting is necessary and very humbling. Usually we are waiting for something we need and it puts us in a position where we are not in control. The doctor will see us when s/he is ready. The cashier will serve us when it is our turn. If we refuse to wait and we abort the process prematurely, we leave empty-handed.

Perhaps more than any other element of the spiritual life, the waiting times are the times when we face the fact that we do not have God in our back pockets. We cannot do anything to make him come or to make him do what we want him to do even one second before he is ready. We really are at the mercy. But—thanks be to God!—we are at the mercy of a God who comes to us when it is time.

But how do we guide others through the wilderness of waiting when we are not very good at it ourselves? The best guide for any journey is one who has made the journey him/herself—perhaps multiple times—so that they know something about the terrain, the climate, and the beauties, dangers and challenges along the way. What people need most is leaders who can call them to the disciplines of the spiritual journey with an inner authority that comes from their own lived experience. Moses is a case in point.

Most of Moses' preparation for leadership took place during forty years of solitude and waiting. For most of that time, he probably didn't even know what he was waiting *for* but he remained in that in-between place until he settled down from the explosiveness of his youth and began to experience God in ways that changed him fundamentally. This turned out to be the very best preparation for the task of leadership. By the time he accepted the responsibility of leading the Israelites out of Egypt, he was

a different person. Now, rather than being the brash, impulsive, take-matters-into-my-own-hands kind of leader that he once was, he was able to offer a deeply spiritual response in the face of grave danger.

We all know the story: with great pomp and circumstance the Israelites had left Egypt but as they approached the Red Sea, they looked back only to find that the Egyptians had changed their minds and were pursuing them to take them back into slavery. Even with all that they had experienced of God's presence with them, the Israelites' faith faltered. For the first time, they experienced real ambivalence about this journey towards freedom and what it was now requiring of them. They attacked Moses and accused him of bringing them out to the wilderness to die.

But Moses knew better than to get caught up in the people's fears and complaints. Instead he turned inward, to that place where he had learned to wait on God in his own life and he delivered this most counter-intuitive message. *Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians that you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you and you have only to keep still.*" (Exodus 14:13-14)

A Leader in Waiting

It is important not to underestimate the raw human emotion and survival instincts that were at work in this moment. The people were afraid for their lives, as well they should have been. They were backed into a corner between this uncrossable sea and the Egyptians who were now close enough that they could see the whites of their eyes. All of their survival instincts were kicking in.

When people get pushed to the edge of their fear like this it can easily become a frightening and out of control situation. We've all heard horror stories of human stampedes at sporting events or in crowded public places when people feel that there is a threat of violence or danger. What happens in moments like this is a very primal human response that is exacerbated by a herd mentality. If we read this story with our guts, we can feel that the Israelites were on the brink of this kind of disaster. When this kind of dynamic starts to take over, it is an alarming thing and one where great wisdom is required.

Moses' effectiveness in this moment had to do with the fact that, even though he was fully aware of the people's emotion, he was even *more* attuned to the reality of God's presence. He knew that the first thing he needed to do was to help the people "still themselves" and wait on God even in the face of their greatest fear.

What kind of leader is able to call people to wait on God in the face of real threat, when all of their survival instincts are raging? What inner strength does a leader need to be able to access in order to stay calm, to quiet the primal instincts of others, and to create space for waiting on God in the midst of such fierce human reactivity? Only a leader who has waited for God in the darkest moments of his or her own deep need. Only a leader who has stood still in the place where they feared for their very life and waited for God's deliverance. Only the leader who has inner spiritual authority that comes from their own waiting can ask others to do the same.

On the Threshold of Something New

Most of us have not had much training in waiting—or at least not enough to prepare us to help others wait in moments when they feel highly threatened. Richard

Rohr in his book, *Everything Belongs*, calls this waiting place “liminal space.” This comes from the Latin word *limina* which means threshold. Liminal space, or the place of waiting, is “a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.”

Advent teaches us not to run from the liminal place. It teaches us that learning how to wait in our own lives prepares us for those moments when *the only option* for us as a people is to wait on God. Then as leaders we are able to hold others in the waiting because we believe in its necessity and its goodness all the way down to the bottom of our being. Because we have met God in the waiting place (rather than running away or giving in to panic), we ourselves are able to stand firm and believe God for something new and unexpected in a way that makes it possible for others to believe as well.

And so, Advent presents us as leaders with a disturbing question: “Have I learned enough about how to wait on God in my own life that I am able to call others to wait when that is what’s truly needed? Have I done enough spiritual journeying to lead people on this part of their journey?” It is a question worth pondering.

Practicing Advent

Is there anywhere in your personal life or in your leadership where you have reached a challenge or an impasse that defies human answers and where you or those around you might even be starting to panic? Is it possible that this is a place where

God is calling you and/or those you are leading to be still and to wait for his coming?

In silence, take a few moments to enter the Advent season by settling into the training of waiting.

Ruth Haley Barton is co-founder and president of the Transforming Center. A trained spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, she is the author of numerous books and articles on the spiritual life.

©Ruth Haley Barton, 2007. Adapted from *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (IVP, 2008). This article is not to be reproduced without the permission of the author or The Transforming Center. Please visit us at www.thetransformingcenter.org

TRANSFORMING CENTER
Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership