

## Advent: Training in Waiting

Ruth Haley Barton

*“No one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.”*

Isaiah 64:4

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. The seasons of the church year 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. We also read Scripture from a common lectionary, joining with Christian people around the world in allowing ourselves to be guided and shaped by common themes.

Advent, in particular, is a season that gives us the opportunity to practice something that is hard for most of us to do: wait. Advent (lit. “arrival”) teaches us to wait for the coming of Christ into our world, not just way back in Biblical times, but now—in the places where we long for his presence and need his intervention. Advent ushers us into a special kind of waiting that is alert and watchful, patient and yet full of anticipation. Like the doorkeeper in this week’s Gospel reading (Mark 13: 24-37) who is assigned to keep watch while the master is away, we are instructed to be aware and awake so that we don’t miss Christ’s coming in ways that we could not possibly predict. This is the kind of waiting that has us perched on the edge of our seats!

## **Training in Waiting**

For those of us who are leaders, waiting is quite the conundrum. On the one hand, most of us 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. Most of us have not had much training in waiting and there is no seminary course that teaches one how to do it!

On the other hand, waiting is a necessary and very humbling aspect of life in general and the spiritual life in particular. There is something we need, and having to wait for 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 abort the process prematurely, we are left empty-handed. So how do we lead others in something we are not very good at ourselves?

What people need most is leaders who can call them to the disciplines of the spiritual journey from the kind of inner authority that comes through experience. We begin by learning how to wait ourselves. Richard Rohr calls the discipline of waiting in the spiritual life “liminal space.” This comes from the Latin word *limina* which means threshold. As Rohr points out, liminal space 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Advent is an opportunity for us to practice this important Christian discipline. If we are intentional about how we enter into this season, it has the potential to teach us how to wait in our own lives so that when *the only option* for us and for the people we lead is to wait on God, we know what we're doing.

### **A Leader in Waiting**

The significance of a leader's inner authority in calling others to wait, is reflected in a scene from the movie Braveheart. William Wallace is leading his ragtag band of Scottish soldiers into battle for the first time. They have no weapons, no chariots, no horses, no uniforms, none of the accoutrements of war that the opposing army has. All they have is homemade spears that must be thrown at just the right time; if they throw their crude javelins too soon, they will fall in front of the opposing army; if they wait too long, the spears will sail over their opponents heads. Timing is everything and they know they must wait for Wallace's command.

The opposing army comes thundering toward them. In the faces of these untrained soldiers, there is a combination of alertness, fear, readiness, courage and will. Wallace is shouting "Hold! Hold! Hold!" and as a spectator we are wondering if they will have the restraint to wait for exactly the right moment. Will they trust Wallace enough to wait even though their lives are in danger and everything in them screams to *do something?*

If you've seen the movie, you know the answer. They do hold! They wait until Wallace gives the word, and then they launch their spears. These homemade weapons find their mark and the opposing army—with all its sophisticated wartime

accoutrements—turns tail and runs. There was something about the inner strength and authority *of their leader* that caused these men to be willing to wait and then act according to that leader's instruction.

What kind of leader is able to call people to wait on God when waiting runs so powerfully against our human nature? Only a leader who has waited for God in the darkest moments of his or her own deep need can effectively teach others to wait. Only a leader who has stood still and waited for God's deliverance in the place where they feared for their very life has the inner authority to ask others to do the same. Because we have met God in that frightening, liminal space we are able to stand firm and believe God in a way that makes it possible for others to believe as well.

### **Rhythms of Leadership**

Here is one of the great rhythms of leadership—the rhythm of alert waiting and courageous action. We wait on God until he gives us clear direction and then we have the courage to act when the time is right. Spiritual leadership is about knowing which one to call for when.

Advent is the season when we receive training in waiting. We can begin by allowing ourselves to become aware of the liminal spaces in our own lives, determining to keep watch for Christ's presence in those very places. So where is the place in your life right now where you know you need to wait? Where do you long for God to “tear open the heavens and come down” and do some awesome thing that you do not expect? Where are the places in your heart where the longing runs deep—the longing to be restored, the longing to be saved, the longing to be led tenderly like a shepherd leads his sheep? Where

is the place in your ministry where you need to be “strengthened to the end” by the presence of God revealed *to you* in some new way?

These questions usher us into the waiting room of the soul that we occupy more fully during the season of Advent. This is the place where we wait for God to revive us, to restore us and to reveal himself to us in ways that we can see and know. Here *we* are called to *hold* and to *hold on* until we discover that Jesus is near and we see the Son of Man coming through the clouds of our own lives with great power and glory.

And so we pray...

*In the awesome name of God,  
in the victorious name of Jesus,  
in the mysterious name of the Spirit,  
we acknowledge our God  
and we wait;  
we are still  
we are silent  
and we wait.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, as quoted in a sermon entitled “Living in Liminal Space” by Killian Noe, April 7, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Bread of Tomorrow*, Janet Morley, ed. (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p.18.