

## **Advent: The Courage to Wait**

Ruth Haley Barton

*“God comes to us like the sun in the morning...when it is time. We must assume an attitude of waiting, accepting the fact that we are creatures and not the creator. We must do this because it is not our right to do anything else. The initiative is God’s, not ours. We are able to initiate nothing; we are only able to accept.” --Carlo Caretto*

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent (Luke 21:25-36) is an alarming one—full of violent images and ominous predictions. It is not one I would pick to kick off this holy season of quiet waiting; it seems like a very harsh beginning. I would rather avoid the uncomfortable realities represented here and make a gentler transition from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

But the truth is, the scenario described in Luke 21 is much closer to real life than the dreamy images we often associate with the Christmas season. News reports are filled with images of the unresolved tensions of clashing nations, violent interpersonal conflicts, seas riled up with hurricane flooding, and the foreboding that goes along with an economic recession. At a personal level, we are plagued by confusion about conflicts we can’t resolve, fears about losing our job (if we have one) or finding a job (if we don’t), distress about our own failures and the failures of others, and questions that cause us to doubt the very Gospel message we preach.

On second thought, perhaps this passage is exactly where we need to be. It helps us to be honest about our lives and those places that are full of confusion and distress, fear and foreboding. It tells us that in the most distressing and violent-to-the-soul places we are to wait for the Son of Man to come into our lives with the power to heal and glory

to illumine our darkness. And as spiritual leaders, these are the very places where we must call others to wait on God as well—the places where *they* feel most threatened, most disturbed and most confused.

### **A Leader in Waiting**

There is a scene from the movie *Braveheart* that is very powerful in its depiction of the courage it takes to wait and to lead others in waiting. William Wallace is a bold Scotsman who is leading his ragtag band of Scottish soldiers into their first battle for freedom. They have no weapons, no chariots, no horses, no uniforms, none of the accoutrements of war that the opposing army has. What they do have is a courageous and innovative leader whom they trust. That leader (Wallace) has led them to craft homemade spears that they need to throw at just the right time. And they need to wait for Wallace's command. **Timing is everything.** 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.

The opposing army comes thundering toward them. In the faces of these untrained Scottish soldiers one sees a combination of alertness, fear, readiness, courage and will. At the most dramatic moment Wallace is shouting, "Hold! Hold! Hold!" and as a spectator you are wondering, "Will these soldiers have enough discipline and restraint to wait for exactly the right moment to launch their spears? Will they trust their leader enough to wait, even though their very lives are in danger and everything in them screams to *do something?*"

And 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 of its fancy weaponry—turns tail and runs.

What kind of leader is able to call people to wait in the face of real threat, when all their survival instincts are raging? What inner strength does a leader need to access in order to stay calm, to quiet the primal instincts of others, and to create space for listening to God in the midst of such fierce human reactivity? Only a leader who has learned how to wait for God in the darkest moments of his/her own distress and confusion. Only a leader who has experienced God's deliverance in their own lives has enough inner authority to ask others to do the same.

In a world where leadership is often defined as the person who is out front “doing something” or “making something happen,” Advent invites us into a great reversal. During this season we are invited to think of ourselves as leaders **in waiting** because we ourselves have learned how to do it.

### **A Time for Courage**

As it turns out, Advent is a time for courage. Beyond gentle images of beautiful angels, lowing cattle, and an expectant mother, we are called to be aware of the darkness in us and around us. We are encouraged not to run from these realities by hiding our heads in the sand, but to be alert in the midst of it all. Advent is a time to be on guard, to be awake, to refuse to be so caught up in everything around us that we fail to recognize the nearness of Christ in that very place that feels desolate, confusing and beyond hope. It is a time to raise our heads and lift our eyes and watch for our redemption as it draws near.

Advent is a good time to notice the challenges and the places of impasse in our lives or in our leadership, those places where we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if the Son of Man does not come, there is not hope. These are the places that defy human answers and where the people around us may even be starting to panic. We might need to be more honest in acknowledging our own distress and confusion, fear and foreboding. And we might be willing to ask, “Is it possible that this hard-to-acknowledge place is the very arena in which God is calling me and those I am leading to be still and to wait for his deliverance? Am I as willing to be committed to being a leader in waiting as I am to being the leader who is taking the next hill?”

So as leaders, let us thank God together for this season that helps us to practice our waiting. Let us support one another in our waiting. And let us remember that we wait, not as those who have no hope. We wait as those who *know* that we seek a God who comes into every space we create for him.

*You keep us waiting.  
You, the God of all time,  
want us to wait  
for the right time in which to discover  
who we are, where we must go,  
who will be with us, and what we must do.  
**So thank you...for the waiting time.***

*You keep us looking.  
You, the God of all space,  
want us to look in the right and wrong places  
for signs of hope,  
for people who are hopeless,  
for visions of a better world that will appear  
among the disappointments of the world we know.  
**So thank you...for the looking time.***

*You keep us loving.  
You, the God whose name is love,  
Want us to be like you—  
to love the lovely and the unlovely and the unlovable;  
to love without jealousy or design or threat;  
and, most difficult of all,  
to love ourselves.  
**So thank you...for the loving time.***

*And in all this,  
you keep us.  
Through hard questions with no easy answers;  
Through failing where we had hoped to succeed  
and making impact where we felt we were useless;  
through the patience and the dreams and the love of others;  
and through Jesus Christ and his Spirit,  
you keep us.  
**So thank you...for the keeping time,  
and for now  
and forever,  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>***

---

<sup>1</sup> *Iona Community Worship Book*, 1988

Ruth Haley Barton is founding president of the Transforming Center. She is a teacher, spiritual director, retreat leader and is the author of spiritual formation books and resources including *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (InterVarsity Press, 2008).

©Ruth Haley Barton, 2009. Not to be reproduced without permission. [www.thetransformingcenter.org]