

The Great Wait  
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Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Today is the beginning of the New Year in the Christian Calendar. For some of you, this makes no sense at all and just means that Christmas is exactly 23 days away. For others, you may still be getting over Thanksgiving and whatever that brought your way. And yet there may be others who are trying to appreciate Advent, but you find yourself wondering what all the fuss is about.

Advent is a unique time in the liturgical calendar. It's highly symbolic—our colors change to blue, we light candles every week in our Advent wreath, some of us may have Advent calendars at home, and yet it's not exactly a comfortable season if we get to the depths of its meaning.

Advent is about waiting, and how easy is it to wait? Benedictine nun and Worship Scholar Joan Chittister explains, "The liturgical year does not begin at the heart of the Christian enterprise. It does not immediately plunge us into the chaos of the Crucifixion or the giddy confusion of the Resurrection. Instead the year opens with Advent, the season that teaches us to wait for what it beyond the obvious. It trains us to see what is beyond the apparent. Advent makes us look for God in all those places we have, until now, ignored." [1] This isn't easy.

Advent always begins with apocalyptic readings, showing us a potential future of chaos, destruction, and judgment and also imploring us to stay alert and be watchful, for we never know the day that Jesus will return. I've never been too crazy about apocalyptic thinking because it can be used as an excuse to passively sit back and wait for God to take care of everything. This is also probably why I find those Elves on a Shelf that are all the rage these days a little unsettling and just plain creepy. The elf moves around your house every day following the progress of your children. Are you a good boy or girl? I'm not sure, but that elf is going to tell Santa if you're not! My parents had a similar sneaky Christmas tactic, but our 1980s version of the Elf on a Shelf was an imaginary bird named Tweeter who would tell Santa on Maureen and me if we were bad.

This just seems a bit manipulative. It seems like some kids may think that you only need to be good around Christmas and only because you'll get something out of it! This is also exactly why apocalyptic thinking can be problematic too, because shouldn't we be loving God and loving our neighbors all the time, whether the world is going to end in a big fireball of chaos tomorrow or not? Shouldn't we be creating the kingdom of God on earth instead of sitting back and waiting for the Son of Man to come and punish all those mean, nasty people we don't like?

In the Gospel of Luke, we see this passage called the Little Apocalypse—the sun, moon, and stars showing signs, earthquakes, crazy seas, the heavens shaking, and then the Son of Man coming to judge the people. And he's going to be way more difficult to please than your Elf on a Shelf, let me tell you. It's strange and unsettling to begin Advent with these apocalyptic scriptures, and yet it happens every year. Why?

Well the good thing about apocalyptic thinking, especially taken on a more metaphorical level, is that these events point to things beyond our comprehension or control. We figure out that ultimately we're not in charge, God is in charge. This is both liberating and terrifying! Yet, the moral of the story is to be alert and keep awake, and hopefully be decent human beings all the time because you don't know the day or the hour when Jesus will return. In modern terms, act like there's an Elf on your Shelf every day of the year! The best line in Luke is, "Be on guard so

that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life."<sup>[2]</sup>

Methodist Worship Scholar Laurence Hull Stookey says, "Watchfulness is the key [and yet the] Christian faith is less about precise knowledge of the future than about a passion for God's justice and holiness in the present."<sup>[3]</sup> Even though there is so much future orientation in the Little Apocalypse, it's balanced with the message to be present, and to be about the business of God's justice now. That's our job. In Chittister's words, "We are becoming as we go. We learn in Advent to stay in the present, knowing that only the present well lived can possibly lead us to the fullness of life."<sup>[4]</sup>

The present well lived is the only thing that can lead us to the fullness of life—this is so brilliant, but it's hard to stay in this mindset. It reminds me of a time I was taught Vipassana Meditation while I was a hospital chaplain. In Vipassana, which means to see things as they really are, the goal is to totally rid yourself of mental impurities and heal human suffering. It's all about self-observation and being fully present. You pay disciplined attention to the physical sensations of your body as you explore the common root of your mind and body. If done correctly, Vipassana Meditation results in balance and a mind full of love and compassion. And I have never failed more miserably at a spiritual practice than when I learned Vipassana Meditation.<sup>[5]</sup>

When I was taught how to do it, I was instructed that you have to stay in the same position. If you feel any pain in your body, you acknowledge that pain, and then push it out of your mind. You are not to move or make yourself more comfortable to fix that pain. If your mind starts racing, you are to acknowledge your thoughts and then gently set them aside, focusing on your breath. I tried this for about 20 minutes and after my time was up, the instructor immediately turned to me and said that I seemed annoyed and angry by the whole thing and why was that?

In my frustration, I had a bit of an outburst about how crazy this concept is to me. If I'm on the ground in pain when my foot falls asleep, why wouldn't I move to make it better? How could I possibly get deeper into my meditation if I was distracted by something I could easily fix? My instructor smiled throughout my little tirade and said that it seemed this particular spiritual practice didn't make my heart sing (understatement of the year), but that I shouldn't give up either. Maybe because it's so hard, this is exactly what I need to do to push myself because who said anything about spiritual practices and your relationship with God being easy? She smiled sweetly and innocently and asked me, "In the Christian tradition, did Jesus have it easy, dear?"

And isn't this the point as we begin the Season of Advent? Because learning to wait and hope and explore and dig deeper are keys to spiritual development, and the purpose of Advent. We're supposed to think and be quiet before we get to those mountaintops of joy like Christmas. Going back to Chittister, "[Advent] slows us down. It makes us think. It makes us look beyond today to the 'great tomorrow' of life. Without Advent, moved only by the race to nowhere that exhausts the world around us, we could be so frantic with trying to consume and control this life that we fail to develop within ourselves a taste for the spirit that does not die and will not slip through our fingers like the melted snow."<sup>[6]</sup>

And so my hope for all of us in this Season of Advent is that we keep alert, remain watchful, and try our best to be fully present in the mysterious waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ into our midst. Let's not rush off to stores and parties and presents without appreciating the world around us now. Let's look for God in the most unlikely of places. Let's see what is beyond the apparent. And let's be passionate about the justice and holiness of God now. May it be so. Amen.

[1] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, 59.

[2] Luke 21:34.

[3] Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, 122-123.

[4] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, 60.

[5] *Vipassana Meditation, As Taught By S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin*,  
<http://www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.shtml>

[6] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, 61-62.