

What it means to wait for the Lord

If the Lord were coming, what would you do? Would you pray and prepare your heart? Would you examine your conscience and mend your ways? Would you seek out others to proclaim the Good News? Would you shift your focus to those in need?

The problem, of course, is that no one knows when the Lord is coming. Anyone who claims to know is either delusional or lying. Jesus himself tells his disciples, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Mt 24:36, RSV). The coming of the Lord will be the end and fulfillment of history, and this event is hidden within the mystery of God's salvific will.

This does not mean, however, that because no one can know the day or the hour, Christians should remain unprepared. Quite to the contrary, Christians are called to continual readiness.

In the parable of the wise and foolish maidens, we hear just how important readiness is. The foolish maidens delayed, and it was too late for them. While they went off and tried to quickly prepare themselves, "the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut" (Mt 25:10, RSV). Remaining ready is no small matter; everything might hang in the balance.

The season of Advent presses upon us our urgent mission in the Church. Yes, Christ is made present in and through the Church – principally by the sacraments – but the Church's duty is always to prepare for the final union with Christ. Advent is the season of practicing perpetual watchfulness; yet, Advent is not just one cordoned-off season, but a practice for life. As the martyr Alfred Delp, SJ, put it, "Advent is a time of being deeply shaken, so that man will wake up to himself." The

point, then, is to learn how to remain awake and vigilant, to increase in hope.

The question of true power

When we look to Scripture, it is often easier to find people who do not wait for the Lord than it is to find those who do. For example, immediately after the infancy narrative in Luke's Gospel, right when the adult ministry of Jesus is about to begin, we find this list of figures:



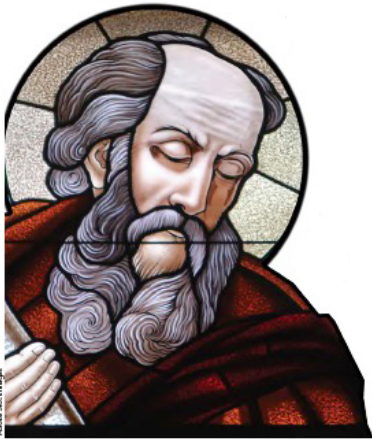
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“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas ...” (Lk 3:1-2, RSV).

Who are all these people? Some of the names are certainly familiar, but why name all? What do they have in common? These are powerbrokers in the time and place when Christ Jesus comes to his people.

Tiberius Caesar is the emperor of Rome, who is cultivating worship to his ancestors so that people will learn to worship

him as a god. Pontius Pilate is the man overseeing this province for the Romans, whose primary interest in life is to grow in favor and importance, and thus to remain a friend of Caesar. Herod is the son of the Herod of Jesus' infancy, and this Herod is manipulative, pleasure-seeking and a slave to his impulses. Philip is the brother of Herod who is hooked on foreign morals and customs, and derelict in his duty as a person of authority. Lysanias is likewise negligent in his duties, preferring comfort and complacency to promoting justice. Annas is the former high priest who then buys the office for his family members afterward, while Caiaphas is Annas' son-in-law, the beneficiary of Annas' nepotism – a man who uses religion to secure his own power.



What all these figures have in common is that they live by one common rule: Increase your own power and prestige if possible, but, whatever happens, do not lose what you have. These are the lords of this time and place; everyone in this region is subject to their swirl of passions. They would categorically reject anyone who calls into question or disturbs their power. They do not wait for the

Lord.

But then, at the end of this list of powerbrokers, St. Luke says this: "... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (Lk 3:2, RSV). Here is one last figure, pinned on to the end of Luke's list. Is this man just like all the others? Sure, he does not have a palace or fine clothing or wealth, but he does have a following. People have flocked to him, responding to what he is doing. And what is he doing? He is prophesying:

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low;
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk 3:4-6, RSV;
cf. Is 40:3-5).

John the Baptist comes upon the scene in this time and place to proclaim that the high things will now be made low, the crooked ways made straight. What are the high things? Whose ways are crooked? Luke just told us – their names are Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lyanias, Annas and Caiphas. These are the ones whose power overshadows the plains and valleys of the land and its people. John the Baptist echoes the Prophet Isaiah to proclaim that the time of the great reversal is at hand.



John, however, does not just preach about the coming of the Lord and the overturning of the powers of the world. He also shows what it means to wait upon the Lord and welcome him when he comes. Despite his own growing popularity, John walks away when Jesus comes. He gives his place of prominence to the one coming after him. John chooses to lose: “I baptize you with water,” he says, “but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3:16, RSV). In John’s Gospel, the Baptist puts it more succinctly: “He must increase, but I must decrease,” (Jn 3:30, RSV).

This is precisely what none of the powerful figures of his day would ever dare to do: unlike all of them, John makes room. He has waited for the Lord, and now he welcomes him.



An engraved illustration image depicts the prophet Jeremiah lamenting over Jerusalem. Adobe Stock

The prophet of waiting

Who waits for the Lord? Certainly not those figures who hoarded power in the time of John the Baptist. Their ironclad rule of “don’t lose” would never permit them to welcome another who would claim lordship over them. To wait for him would mean being willing to change, to become obedient, and to learn to rejoice in what the Lord rejoices in. Those power-players were dead-set against being shaken like that.

If they are not the kind of people who wait for the Lord, then who is? To whom is the coming of the Lord good news? Not the high and mighty, but the down and out. It is the meek and lowly who await the Lord.

John the Baptist announced the imminent coming of the Lord with the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Those who heard John’s proclamation would know whose words John was repeating, and they would also know the setting in which Isaiah himself

proclaimed that message. When Isaiah prophesied, Israel was in exile, under the power of the Babylonian empire.

What does it mean to live under an unimaginably strong foreign power like that? For Israel, it meant they did not enjoy the freedom to practice their religion, for the state religion of the Babylonians, which was tied into their political structure, was the only one allowed. The Israelites could not speak as they might want to, and they did not have the freedom to develop and express their own culture. Instead, the ways and customs of the Babylonians were thrust upon them.

Frankly, it was just easier to go along with the Babylonians than to resist them. Resistance, it seemed, was futile. Under the weight of the Babylonian empire, the Israelites were poor and in slavery. They had been removed from their land and their possessions. What had been theirs now belonged to their conquerors. They were close to hopelessness.

Wisdom from Pope Benedict XVI



“Advent’s intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope. The purpose of the Church’s year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart’s memory so that it can discern the star of hope.”

– Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), in his 1986 book “Seek That Which Is Above”

In that very condition, what did God tell his prophet Isaiah to proclaim? We can summarize the proclamation from Isaiah 40 like this:

First, God tells his people that the power of their conquerors cannot and will not last forever.

“Comfort, oh comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her that her term of service is over. ... All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field: Grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them” (Is 40:1-2, 6-7, JPS; cf. 15-17).

Babylon is in full bloom, but what appears now so spectacular and everlasting will wither and perish. Babylon’s power will pass away (all worldly regimes do, after all), so those under its rule can take comfort.

Second, God tells his people that they are known by God himself.

“Like a shepherd [the Lord] pastures His flock: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them in His bosom; gently He drives the mother sheep. ... Why do you say, O Jacob, Why declare, O Israel, ‘My way is hid from the Lord, my cause is ignored by my God?’ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is God from of old, Creator of the earth from end to end, He never grows faint or weary, His wisdom cannot be fathomed” (Is 40:11, 27-28, JPS).



Even in this place where all seems lost and Israel has in fact lost itself, as Israel is buried under these foreign customs and losing remembrance of its very identity, the Lord God knows his people and never loses sight of them.

Third and finally, God is coming.

“Ascend a lofty mountain, O herald of joy to Zion; raise your

voice with power, O herald of joy to Jerusalem – raise it, have no fear; announce to the cities of Judah: Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes in might, and his arm wins triumph for Him; see, His reward is with Him, His recompense before Him” (Is 40:9-10, JPS).

Into the predicament that Israel cannot escape, the Lord God is coming to liberate them. The Lord God will draw near, he will lift them up, and he will restore them to all they have lost. He is coming.

In the time of great exile in which Isaiah prophesies, Israel has sinned and Israel is being crushed. Precisely at this time Israel’s only hope is in the Lord, who alone can both forgive sins and raise up the lowly from under the great powers of the world. Israel must therefore prepare and wait for the Lord, who is coming.

When John the Baptist preaches, this very prophecy is being spoken again, though its impact will go further. John’s proclamation is for Israel again – who is now being crushed by Rome – but it is now also for everyone, including the Gentiles. John the Baptist is proclaiming that the power of the powerful is coming to an end, that the Lord knows his own by name, and that the Lord is coming.

John is proclaiming that salvation is coming from the one born of Mary.

The true figure of Advent

Mary is not from the center of things – Rome, or even Jerusalem – but from a far-off village in Galilee. She is not a man of great standing, but a woman of low degree. She is not an adult but a young person. She is not rich but poor. She is not prominent but humble. The Word of the Lord came to her, and she bore the Savior.

Thinking of the ancient Israelites in captivity, or the people

on the bottom whom John proclaims will be lifted up, and Mary the lowly handmaiden, we should ask again: Who waits for the Lord? Who needs him? Who longs for him? Whose hope is in him alone?

The ones who wait for the Lord are more often the poor, the sick, the lonely and the victimized. It is more often those weighed down by their own sins and the sins of others. It is more often those not in the center of things but off in the margins. It is more often those who have not been comforted but long for comfort.

For those of us with the time, the peace of mind and the relative comfort to do so, the practice of Advent asks us to call to mind those who need the Lord. For those who are not poor, hungry, sorrowful or ridiculed, the way to be on the side of the Lord's blessings is to join yourself with those who are. Only the lowly wait for the Lord, and those who join themselves to the lowly wait with them.



Advent is a season of practicing the Christian life of waiting for the Lord. In looking upon the Advent wreath, we might allow the four candles to remind us of how we are to wait: for the Lord, with others. Each candle can become a reminder of the poor, the sick, the lonely and the victimized. Each week as one of these candles is lit, our Advent prayers can be offered for and with them. Or, alternatively, if we ourselves are the ones who are poor, sick, lonely or victimized, we might see in each flame the light of the Lord who is coming to us.

This Advent practice is a practice for how to live in between the memory of Christ who has come and the hope of Christ who

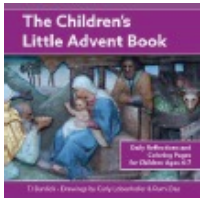
will come again. We wait for the Lord when we become lowly, when we join ourselves to the lowly, when we prepare to give the Lord pride of place, and when we choose to lose – decreasing so he may increase.

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Resources to accompany you through Advent

How do we practically await the coming of the Lord and prepare our hearts? Here are some resources from the OSV bookstore to help you journey through the season.

[“The Children’s Little Advent Book: Daily Reflections and Coloring Pages for Children Ages 4-7” \(\\$11.95\)](#)



“The Children’s Little Advent Book” is designed to help parents with children ages 4-7 on a journey through Advent to Christmas. Each day’s entry includes a brief Scripture reading, a reflection, discussion questions, a brief prayer, and a simple coloring page for children to complete after praying with their families.

[“Emmanuel Is Coming: Advent Prepares Us” \(\\$3.95\).](#)



The new “Emmanuel Is Coming: Advent Prepares Us” is a 12-page, full-color booklet packed with thoughtful reflections based on the Sunday readings, along with questions to ponder, Catechism connections, signs of the season, family activities and prayers. In addition to two pages of meditations for each week, the booklet includes additional information to help Catholics experience a deeply meaningful Advent, including an explanation of the Advent wreath, 0 Antiphons, and an Advent Prayer.

[“Oriens: A Pilgrimage Through Advent and Christmas 2021” \(\\$18.95\).](#)



Your “Oriens” journey begins on the First Sunday of Advent and continues until the feast of the Presentation on February 2. With this book as your guide, you’ll learn how to pray, or to pray more deeply. Each day you’ll read a Scripture passage, receive Father Joel Sember’s guidance on how to pray with that passage, and find questions for reflection and journaling.

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