

# **“A Time to Wait: An Advent Reflection”**

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On a hectic December morning several years ago, as I was getting ready to go to work, into our bedroom marched my then two and a half year old son Brian, clad in nothing but a diaper, and holding a bottle of milk like a royal scepter. He looked at me, and in a triumphant voice proclaimed: “Jesus is coming!!!” But before I could congratulate myself for our having done such a fine job in Advent catechesis, he immediately followed that proclamation with a second: “Go! Go! Power Rangers!!!” And with this solemn invocation of the superheroes of the day, he did an about-face and marched back into the living room.

There is a way in which this brief encounter sums up the challenge of the Advent season: the confrontation between our faith and a culture often tone deaf to the values of Advent. I would like to consider briefly but one aspect of this confrontation (and it need not always be a confrontation) between faith and our contemporary culture, namely, the impact of modern technology on our experience of time.

## **Technology and the Conquest of Time**

The clock may be the most important machine of modern technology. Until the late thirteenth century, most clocks were either sundials or water clocks, both of which kept time by careful alignment with the rhythms of the natural order. With the advent of the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century, and its mass production in the 19th century, time became separated from natural rhythms, both internal (e.g., heartbeat,

breathing, hunger patterns) and external (e.g., the cycle of day and night, the annual seasons), to which pre-modern persons had to align themselves. Once time could be measured in independent units apart from the consideration of internal or external rhythms, time began to appear “under our control.” We are now encouraged to “make the most of our time,” or to “use our time wisely.” Activities are measured by their time-efficiency.

Alongside clocks we could include, microwave ovens, cell phones, pagers, home computers and a myriad other devices which modern technology offers us in our quest to conquer time. Let us consider but one, the microwave oven. Most of us now rely on microwave ovens for a good share of the cooking in our homes. First employed primarily to warm up left-overs, we now have packaged microwave meals which help us save time by eliminating much of the meal preparation. What microwaves offer us is a more efficient use of time. But they also change the way we “spend” time, for the time spent preparing a meal is also the best argument for its leisurely consumption. A meal which requires no preparation also lays little claim to sustained dinner interaction. Microwave meals are made, not just to be prepared quickly, but to be consumed quickly.

This is the paradox of our age: we can easily become so trapped in an endless spiral to purchase more technological gadgets which promise to help us “save” time that we have lost the ability to “spend” time. We no longer know how to luxuriate in the present because we are obsessed with technologically “banking” our time for some never quite realized future enjoyment. Even actively committed Christians tend to see the issue of time as one of finding a place for “religious time” in their busy lives. They will heroically carve out a place for brief daily prayer, Sunday eucharist, children’s catechesis

and perhaps a weeknight parish meeting of one kind or another. But what is forgotten is the invitation which the season of Advent offers us, not just to carve out some time for God, but to undergo conversion in our very experience of time. It is in Advent that we learn, not to master time, but rather to submit oneself to the flow of God's time. In Advent we learn the spirituality of waiting.

### **Waiting with Elizabeth and Mary**

Advent draws our attention to two biblical pregnancies. To one young girl, Mary, an angel announces the inexplicable—she shall bear a child. To another old and barren woman, Elizabeth, cousin to the young girl, the gift of pregnancy is also given. And in the womb of Elizabeth, the blessed leaps in the presence of the one who blesses. And so these two women wait and with all the mothers of the world, teach us how to wait. So let us submit to the pedagogy of mothers and the testimony of fathers and reflect on the lessons that come from bringing a child into the world.

### **Waiting for the One Who Is Already Here**

First there is the news that there is to be a child. Often a woman realizes this almost intuitively, sensing the first changes in her body. The waiting begins. But it is a peculiar waiting for there already is a child in the womb. And yet, in the beginning, particularly for the father, there are few discernible signs. Therein lies the heart of the Advent spirit.

Advent is a paradoxical season. It is to be a season of waiting, a season governed by anticipation. But what are we waiting for? We are waiting for the Christ who has already come and is to come again. Much like the child in the womb, we believe Christ

to be present and yet we wait. We know what it is to wait for a guest to arrive; but waiting on a guest who has *already* arrived is another matter! And yet that is what Advent asks of us. In faith we must celebrate, even in our waiting, the reality of Emmanuel, *God with us*.

This is the central challenge for any spirituality. How do we discover God when the divine presence is not obvious? How do we find God when it is his absence which seems most evident? We must learn to cultivate, the mothers of the church remind us, attentiveness and contemplation.

### **Attentiveness and Contemplation**

As the pregnancy progresses into the second trimester the signs of new life become more observable. From the beginning the mother experiences any of a number of changes—some pleasant, many not so pleasant. Experienced mothers can feel the child move as early as seventeen weeks. For new mothers it may be as late as twenty weeks. What happens for a couple as they move into the second trimester is the cultivation of a new kind of attentiveness. I recall Diana, my wife, telling me that as the pregnancy progressed she became much more conscious of her body. Now obviously we are always embodied. We encounter the world through our bodies. But that doesn't mean that we are conscious of them. Frankly we tend to take a lot of our *bodily* reality for granted. But when a woman is pregnant it is hard to take the body for granted. A pregnant mother is particularly attentive to the "text" of her own body.

As a father I found myself becoming more attentive as well. I had to attend to Diana's special needs as the pregnancy progressed. But I also found myself delighting in all sorts of things. I recall reclining in attentive silence next to my wife, like a bird-

watcher waiting in stillness for the call of a rare bird. I watched for the first discernible kick of the child in the womb. Later it was the chance sweep of an arm or leg across the interior womb creating a visible rippling across the abdomen, a teasing hint of that which was hidden.

There is so much in our lives that goes by unnoticed. Part of learning to wait for God has to do with being attentive to what is happening in our lives. As parents wait for the coming birth they become attentive to the simple signs of the child's presence, the small delights and joys that come their way with each milestone. In a similar way, finding God is a matter of attentiveness. The problem is that being attentive to the simple blessings of life is precisely what our culture makes so difficult. This kind of attentiveness requires a contemplative spirit. For most of us this contemplation must be exercised in the mundane. Our great spiritual tradition gives us the witness of Brother Lawrence who took comfort in finding the presence of God while washing dishes. Even today, the opportunity for such reflection can come in the commute home, in peeling potatoes, sweeping the kitchen floor or tinkering under the hood of a car. These are times when the very simplicity or mindlessness of the tasks can be a means of quieting ourselves and focusing on the present. They can be times which invite us to be still and receptive to the graces of the moment.

### **Confinement**

One of the most difficult aspects of pregnancy for my wife, Diana was the experience of progressive confinement. She was not prepared for the way in which she quickly tired. This confinement was even more pronounced, not surprisingly, when she carried twins. She could not work the long hours to which she was accustomed. An agile

and athletic woman, she found herself feeling clumsy and awkward. She had to learn not to fight the increased confinement and limits the pregnancy imposed on her.

How remarkably difficult it is to embrace confinement, the experience of limitation and constraint. Technology offers us a radical transcendence of confinement and limits. It lures us on with the offer of unlimited accessibility to all we desire. And yet a mother bearing a child reminds us of the grace of simply and freely embracing limits. To learn to wait is to learn that not everything can be or need be in our possession or immediately accessible to us. To learn to wait is to delight in what is at hand rather than to long for what is not. A mother bearing a child learns to delight in the spontaneous hiccups of the child she carries. She learns to embrace limits and in Advent each of us is invited to see a spirituality of waiting as an invitation to embrace limits ourselves.

### **Open to Surprise**

This leads to the final period of the pregnancy, the weeks leading up to the birth. We have had four pregnancies. One ended in miscarriage, in two other pregnancies the onset of labor was artificially induced, and another came “naturally,” which is to say, according to the child’s schedule and not ours. The difference in the experiences was striking. The miscarriage itself was a painful experience of the fragility of life and a sobering realization that we Catholics, for all of our convictions about the sanctity of life from conception on, have a long ways to go in learning to attend pastorally to those who suffer the pain of miscarriage.

The experience of waiting for the “natural” onset of labor was unique. We knew the baby could come at any time over the period of almost a month. With every pain Diana experienced we wondered, “was this it?” And then came the frenetic activity

when the labor actually began. Calling important family and friends, getting the car packed. By contrast, the two cases in which the labor was artificially induced was far less tense, we had an appointment at the hospital and so knew several days in advance when the labor would begin. It certainly allowed us to prepare for the event and minimize possible schedule conflicts. Yet what made the pregnancy ending in the natural onset of labor so different from those that ended with an artificial induction was precisely that the former was beyond our control. The baby was going to come according to his schedule (we had all boys!) not ours. Waiting for the labor to begin was a profound lesson in abandonment, giving up control of our lives. That is why I think it so telling that today a far greater number of pregnancies end with artificially induced labor than was the case twenty years ago. Of course many of these are for medical reasons, but more and more are not. I raise this concern with the honest admission that we too induced labor on one occasion for non-medical reasons. The experience has led us to reflect more on what is lost in the experience of an artificially induced labor. When scheduling a birth around vacations and business trips is as easy as the scheduling of dental appointments, is there a danger of diminishing the sanctity of the birth itself? Are we losing one of the precious gifts that a pregnancy offers us—namely the wonderful blessings that come when we become receptive to that which is beyond our control.

This question of control and the value of “planned labor” suggests the fundamental difficulty with the popular parental notion of “quality time” set aside to interact with our children. For me an example of “quality time” would be the time I set aside to go to an Astros game with my boys or to read with them at night before bed. This “quality time” is important. But there is a depth and a texture to my experience of

my children that often doesn't emerge in such carefully planned events but rather in the "down time" when nothing important seems to be happening. For example, yesterday, driving my children home from pre-school, I listened to my four year old making up a hymn with a spontaneous and hilarious melange of disconnected religious images. It was a musical creation I would not have heard if I were on the cell phone taking care of business or listening to an audio-novel. Yet this "down time" is precisely what technology wants to eliminate. The hard truth is that we cannot plan for or manipulate God's grace. Our lives are blessed to the degree that we are receptive to the moment as parents who must be open and ready for the onset of labor.

### **A New Child, a New Life—the Gift of Wonder!**

And with the birth of a child the waiting gives way to wonder. The child comes and it is a time of rejoicing. Few things are more incredible than holding a newborn infant close to your chest. This is what an Advent spirituality points toward. We await the coming of the Word incarnate only to discover that the Word has already come to us, into our daily world. When God chose to enter our world almost 2000 years ago, God entered *our* world, a world filled with mundane daily tasks for which few are canonized: the world of family and work, the world of daily labor, meal preparation and household chores. He took all that is ordinary and, to our modern eyes, boring and without value, and he blessed it and made it holy.

Finally, the birth of a child also begets a new form of waiting as we can only imagine the tale yet to be written in our child's life. And so too we wait for the final chapter of human history to be written in the coming anew of the One who is already with us—present now under the veil of simple acts of kindness and gratitude, surprising

eruptions of grace and blessing, moments snatched for reflection and contemplation.

Amidst the noise of a culture that screams like a carnival huckster that time is growing short in this season of consumption, we must learn to wait in traffic, kitchens, classrooms, offices and yes, even in church. We must wait with eyes wide open for signs that our guest is already with us, whispering a word of invitation to abide in him now and forever.