

Voices: Advent—waiting when we do not know what to expect

December 8, 2016

The election has come and gone. Some will breathe sighs of relief, and some shouts of joy. I count myself among those who cannot do either, but wait with no small measure of fear as to what is to come—not for myself, but for those whose lives may be materially affected by policies grounded in campaign promises. I confess this fear, and am not ready to disown it yet.



Myles Werntz It is appropriate, I think, that this season of waiting for the next president comes in the season of Advent. Advent is the season in which we wait for that which we do not know how to expect, in hope and in reverent fear. And for American Christians dismayed by the election results, Advent is the providential space we now enter.

As Christians, Advent is a time for repenting of vain hopes in all of the messiahs who did not come to pass. It is not some turn of history that we are waiting for, but God, the one who breaks into the house and throws open the windows of what we have hoped in.

Summoned to say yes

In this election, I confess, I hoped in political discourse, and in the giving and taking of reasons, that we as Christians would reject strong kings in favor of trust. If the election had turned a different direction, I confess, I would be not be seeing Advent in the same way, reminded the cycle of elections in the City of Man is eclipsed and enfolded into a different reality—the work of God, which reframes the events of history.

The fact I would not look at Advent in this way is perhaps a sign I need it all the more.

What Advent offers us is, at best, unnerving. For like expectant parents, we wait in Advent as those not knowing what it is we are waiting for, with both hope and fear. Mary and Joseph had received word of a child who would both break their chains and break their hearts, but with no idea what that would look like.

And so, Jesus' birth came in an anticipation of a hope whose fullness they could not name, a waiting characterized by hope for their child and fear of what unknowns would come with him. Had they known Jesus would bring the persecutions of Herod, a flight to Egypt, the humiliations of a prophet cast out of his hometown, I believe—and hope—they still would have said yes. But this, too, is perhaps a grace, that in Advent, we wait for that which is unknown and are summoned to say yes to God in the absence of a defined future.

Waiting in anticipation

The waiting that comes in Advent is not ultimately of a kind, though, that removes the people of God from the world of Rome, but one that moves us more deeply into it, for the God who comes to us in Advent is one who troubles the world, whose appearance is accompanied by the thunder of angels and the wrath of Herod. For in Jesus, we find a Messiah who would heal the blind and the sick, eat with the Gentile, raise the dead and cleanse

the Temple, and who empowers his disciples to do the same things and then some.

The waiting for Christ was not ultimately one of resignation to whatever may come, but a waiting in anticipation to follow the Messiah, wherever that goes and whatever threats it entails.

Advent is, in other words, for all those with questions about what God is up to, a time of anticipatory hope, soberly and clearly seeing the world, and trusting in a God who will work in ways that cannot yet be seen.

The time of waiting is the time, as 1 Peter reminds us, for the people of Jesus to live lives of holiness and trust in anticipation, although we cannot yet say what that call of the future will look like.

Waiting to follow

It is a time for trust in a God who is coming, and whose arrival will shatter things we cannot yet see need to be shattered and who will call us into places that we cannot yet name. It is the season when the people of God prepare for the unknown future the ways we have always prepared—in prayer, repentance and worship. Advent is a summons to remember who we are as the people of God and that our hope is a different hope than that promised by even the best election.

As we walk through Advent, let us be people who wait for the coming of God, praying we will be people—sobered and chastened—who follow that God to the ends of the earth.

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