

## **HOLY WAITING**

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Texts: 1 Thessalonians 3:4-13 and Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

It is that time of year when children's prayers turn from "Thank you God for the turkey and mashed potatoes" to "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth and a pony." Bridging these Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays is Advent – a season of waiting, preparing, and anticipating. Much of the world knows nothing about Advent, but they do know about waiting, preparing, and anticipating these days, aided by an endless series of catalogues, promotions, advertisements, and versions of *Santa Baby*. There is a lot of waiting in lines for purchases and waiting online for processing purchases and waiting for a parking space to open up anywhere; there is a lot of preparing – writing Christmas cards, decorating homes with Christmas trees and red bows and green greens, and baking countless cookies for Christmas parties; there is a lot of anticipating of presents and family time and presents and vacation time and presents and party time and presents. That is the world's version of these days between the holidays which are only nominally holy days.

The church marks these weeks with waiting, preparing, and anticipating of a different sort – or at least we should. We wait for the coming of the Christ child and for his coming again one day. We prepare our hearts to receive him in love. We anticipate the great promise of salvation and hope he brings as God's love incarnate among us, and we anticipate too his return in glory. Now it might be fair to ask which of those descriptions of waiting, preparing, and anticipating best describes your Advent. Is it more akin to the frenetic pace of shop 'til you drop and vexations with the decorations? Or do you take time to cherish in your heart the rosy promises of the coming of the Christ child? Do you observe this season of Advent in any significant way or do you just race to Christmas?

Advent is a holy season and a time for God to make us a little more holy in our expectant waiting. While *holy* might seem to be a term reserved for God, the saints, and the liturgical seasons, we too are called to be holy. We are called to be holy because God is holy, and we are created in the image of God. As Eugene Peterson writes:

*“Holy” is the best word we have for the all-encompassing, all-embracing life of God that transforms us into a uniquely formed and set-apart people.... Holy is something lived. It is the life of God breathed into and invigorating our lives....*<sup>1</sup>

The early church father John Cassian puts it in slightly more active terms:

*To cling always to God and to the things of God – this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows.*<sup>2</sup>

To be *holy* is to cling to God and the things of God – to be *more holy* is to cling a little more tightly, or to cling a little more often, or to cling to a few more things of God which requires letting go of some of those unholy things to which we now cling.

What are the things of God to which we are called to cling? Paul suggests those things include humility and generosity, love and gratitude, obedience and integrity. Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, suggests they include service to God without fear in holiness and righteousness all our days. In the letter to the Thessalonians that I read a few moments ago, Paul suggests it is faith and love so evident in the life of the young church. He prays that God would bless them so that they might increase in love for one another and for all – not just for fellow Christians but for all people – and would strengthen their hearts in holiness. These are the things of God to which we should cling. Jesus suggests all those things are summed up with “love the Lord with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.” That is what it is to be holy people. What then does *holy* look like?

*Holy* looks like the five-year old brother of a little girl named Liz. Liz suffered from a rare disease and needed a blood transfusion to save her life. Her little brother had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. When the doctor explained the situation to the boy and asked if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister, he hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, “*Yes, I’ll do it, if it will save her.*” As the transfusion progressed, the boy lay in bed next to his sister and smiled as he watched the color return to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor with eyes brimming with tears and asked in a trembling voice, “*Will I start to die right away?*” You see, the young boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was giving all of his blood to his sister in order to save her. *Holy* looks a little like that five-year old brother, and so we pray: Lord, make us more holy – more like that little boy!

*Holy* looks like 6-year old Misha who lived in a government-run orphanage in Russia. After hearing the Christmas story for the first time, he was invited with the other children in the orphanage to make a model of the manger. To the surprise of the teachers there, Misha had two babies in the manger he made. When asked about this, Misha repeated the Christmas story in surprising detail until he came to the part where Mary put Jesus into the manger. Then he said:

*When Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him, "I have no mama and no papa, so I don't have any place to stay." Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everyone else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anyone ever gave me." So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and told me I could stay with him – always.<sup>3</sup>*

*Holy* looks a little like little Misha. Unless you become like children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus. And so we pray: "Lord, make us more holy – make us a little more like Misha!

More holy doesn't mean perfect or sinless or angelic. It looks like the grubby shepherds leaving their sheep, going to the stable to offer their praise, and returning to their fields praising God. It looks like sweaty wise men following a star with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in their saddlebags. It looks like young Mary murmuring, "*Let it be with me according to your word*" after her visit with the angel. It looks like skeptical Joseph, taking Mary as his wife even though she was pregnant, because an angel told him in a dream to do so. *Holy* looks like ordinary people who cling to the things of God amid all the other business and busyness of their lives – and through them God does wonderful things.

This Advent season, perhaps *holy* might look a little like you, clinging to those things of God – to those gracious, humble, loving, faithful things of God amid all the glitz and glitter of the season, amid all the din and distraction of world events that would drown out the tidings of great joy for all people. *Holy* might look like you, asking the question little Misha asked, "*What do I have that I can give to Jesus?*" For we all have something to give, and in giving of ourselves, *holy* might look a little like you. And so we pray: "Lord, strengthen our hearts in

holiness. In this Advent season while we await your coming, make us more holy.  
Make us **all** more holy.” Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007, p.127-128

<sup>2</sup> John Cassian, *Leadership*

<sup>3</sup> “A Russian Christmas Story”, Canon Diana Witts, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 18-25, 2000, p.10