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Waiting in joyful hope this Advent season

Chase Nordengren | Dec. 6, 2012 Young Voices

It has always been difficult, at least for me, to imagine Advent as a season of penitence. In our tradition, the days leading up to Christmas are second only to the days leading up to Easter as an opportunity to practice abstinence, consider our sins and prepare the way of the Lord. Where do the candy, the tree trimming, the lessons and carols, the teas and the sleigh rides fit into all of that?

Even consumerism, the perennial demon of a thousand homilies this time of year, isn't wholly to blame. There's nothing wrong with the time we spend with family and friends re-enacting the traditions of the holidays. Indeed, it's that spirit, the spirit of togetherness, that we try to capture, that we try to replicate in the weeks and months ahead.

Perhaps, then, penitence is to be found in Advent's other major theme: waiting. In the readings and prayers of Advent, the story of God's people awaiting a savior is retold. We are asked, as Christians, to connect this period of waiting to our own spirit of waiting for Christ's second coming, asked to anticipate and remain thoughtful of our constant waiting for that day as we wait for the joyful feast of Christmastime.

This time of year, my theological thoughts always seem to find their way back to Archbishop Oscar Romero. The martyr's work and preaching are of occasion in all seasons, but his preaching on Advent and Christmas has always struck me as particularly poignant. Here, Romero speaks directly to a people in poverty, pain and despair about the fruitfulness of waiting while simultaneously demonstrating a kind of impatience with injustice and violence.

"Advent should admonish us to discover," Romero proclaims, "in each brother or sister that we greet, in each friend whose hand we shake, in each beggar who asks for bread, in each worker who wants to use the right to join a union, in each peasant who looks for work in the coffee groves, the face of Christ. This is what Advent is: Christ living among us."

As you flip through "The Violence of Love [1]," a collection of quotes from Romero printed in chronological order, you wander into the cycle of Advent again and again, each time Romero's voice becoming stronger: Look for Christ around you, look for Christ amidst despair, look for Christ so you know who you will see in the manger, look for Christ so you know who you will see when he returns. He is there if you will look.

Romero knew well, however, the pain that could accompany this joy.

"Humans long for peace, for justice, for a reign of divine law, for something holy, for what is far from earth's realities." We have the hope that creates this longing, Romero argues, precisely because we can see Christ here, because we can imagine something about the reign of God from the love and grace of our human brethren.

Still, we know what we're missing. By witnessing Christ in the poorest of us, we witness Christ's suffering in that person's daily trials. We long for the time when that suffering will end. We long for the time when our own suffering will end.

For the victim of depression, it's easy to wonder at this time of year whether all this celebration is in vain. Our trees and lights will not bring about the second coming any earlier, nor will they stop the violence of a place like 1980s El Salvador, or even bring something as small as the love and togetherness we might long for. To have those feelings as the world seems to celebrate and cheer around you can make the sense of loneliness and isolation all the stronger.

While we don't all have the same emotional relationship to this season or any other, I have the sneaking suspicion we all have in ourselves at least some element of both the celebratory and the mournful, watchfulness and relief. "We wait in joyful hope," the liturgy paradoxically proclaims, "for the coming of our savior." Advent is all about living in that paradoxical waiting.

The penitence of the season, then, comes from the reminder that the pain and the saving are inextricably tied.

"God keeps on saving in history," Romero says. "By the light of these Bible readings, we must continue all the history that God has in his eternal mind, even to the concrete events of our abductions, of our tortures, of our own sad history. That is where we are to find our God."

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