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Advent: Broken down in Indiana

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Smoke pouring out from under the hood of your car is never a good thing.

In this case, it turned out to be steam, not smoke, but combined with a temperature gauge that kept pushing past ?H,? we knew we had a problem. To make things worse, we were returning from an out-of-state Thanksgiving trip and were a good three hours from home.

As we exited the freeway in search of a mechanic, we were greeted with a strip with every chain imaginable: Walmart, Olive Garden, Best Western -- all of which we would frequent over the next three days while waiting for a garage in a 50-mile radius to open. Vestiges of Indiana?s blue laws meant no one could look at the car until Monday.

I?m all for honoring the Sabbath, but when you need an emergency car repair, it can be a real pain. Although we considered renting a car to get home and trying to facilitate our car repair from 150 miles away, eventually we decided to just hunker down and wait.

Waiting is not a very popular thing to do these days -- if it ever was. We are annoyed by the little waits: for the long check-out line, for the microwave popcorn to pop, for the results of Friday?s math test. And we are terrified of more serious waits: for Mr. or Ms. Right, for a child, for the results of the biopsy.

In fact, it is fear that makes waiting so hard. If we were sure that everything would turn out OK in the end, it wouldn?t be so hard to wait. While my husband and I were waiting to adopt our children, it wasn?t just that it was taking so long, but that deep down we were terrified we might never be parents.

We learned a lot about waiting during those years -- that it was easier to wait with others and in community, and that God was with us in our waiting. Waiting is a spiritual practice, one all Catholics get to hone every year during the four-week boot camp that is Advent.

Ironically, it is during those weeks that Americans are most bombarded by a consumer culture that tells us we shouldn?t have to wait for anything -- unless you?re a Black Friday shopper camping out in front of a store

waiting for a 4 a.m. sale.

Shopping is all about urgency. Buy now! Supplies are limited! Be the first to have the new model! Why save up for a new TV when there are no payments until January 2011? You work hard; why not treat yourself? And why shouldn?t your child have the Zhu Zhu Pet or iPhone?

Previous generations taught their children the lessons of delayed gratification -- that something you waited for was that much sweeter, and that you were a stronger person for being able to wait. A friend recently admitted that her children have never had to do without anything they have wanted. She was rightfully concerned about contributing to the ?entitlement generation.?

She is the same friend who, about 10 years earlier, remarked that she could remember exactly when she stopped looking at price tags before buying things. That financial freedom felt oddly uncomfortable for her.

I think it?s because she knows the value of waiting.

As parents, we have the responsibility to teach our children how to wait. Of course, the best way to teach is to practice what we preach, by modeling delayed gratification and living in the present moment. But ironically it is my 2-year-old who encourages me to ?be here now.? For him, there is nothing else.

For all he knew, those three extra days at a hotel in Indiana were all part of the Thanksgiving weekend plan. He got to push the buttons on the hotel elevator, play with the ice machine and eat crackers in a king-sized bed.

I was a little slower to accept that I couldn?t do anything about our situation, but once I did, I made the best of it. I soaked for a few minutes in the hotel Jacuzzi, enjoyed not having to cook and ate crackers in bed, too.

In the end, our car repair was expensive, but not as dire as we first thought. That extra expense will affect how much we can spend on Christmas gifts this year. But that?s not what?s really important, after all.

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