

Advent 2023, Week 3 Reflection

JOY, SORROW, AND PATIENCE IN WAITING

Welcome to the Third Week of the Advent audio retreat, presented by Jesuit Connections, a program of the Office of Ignatian Spirituality. Now that we've contemplated "Your Gifts" as "An Important Part of God's Story," let's pause and breathe deeply as we turn our attention to this week's theme: "Joy, Sorrow, and Patience in the Waiting." This week's reflection was written by Michael Matulewicz, an alum of the Contemplative Leaders in Action program in Philadelphia...

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When I was a child, I couldn't wait for Christmas day. The waiting seemed almost endless. It was, as Ralphie noted in the classic "A Christmas Story," the day "upon which the entire kid year revolved." I knew the toys would be coming. I had no doubt. They were hidden only by the paper they were wrapped in. When December 25th finally arrived, the anticipation exploded in a flurry of torn wrapping paper as the new toys were at last revealed.

In recent years, many have bemoaned that "Christmas creep" encroaches earlier and earlier, with radio stations playing 24-hour carols before Thanksgiving, and stores putting up displays before Halloween. Then, on December 26th it's all gone. Music is turned off, decorations put away, finished for another ten months. Advent seems even more swept away, just like the wrapping paper of my childhood.

As the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin noted, "we are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay." Advent is after all a season of waiting, of patience. Perhaps our natural impatience is why it can be so overlooked. Yet the four weeks of Advent are nothing compared to the thousands of years of waiting that Israel endured as it looked for the Messiah.

If we more deeply consider these eons of waiting, perhaps we can appreciate the reprieve that the Church gives us on this Third Sunday of Advent. Traditionally called "Gaudete" or "Rejoice" Sunday, today's readings are filled with references to joy at the coming Christ. There are many images we can resonate with to understand the kind of joy we are to expect when the Messiah comes. For example, Isaiah's comparison to the joy a bridegroom felt on his wedding day reminded me of the pure happiness I felt on my own four years ago.

Yet, as there can be no light without darkness, we can't expect to have the same joy of arrival without experiencing the impatience and sometimes pain of waiting. The Jewish Bible, our Christian Old Testament, is full of examples of this pain of waiting, stories that parallel what Israel felt expecting the Messiah. Abraham and Sarah had to wait until old age to bear children.



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Out of Egypt, the Jews wandered forty years in the desert before reaching the promised land. Countless other Biblical stories seem to emphasize the waiting game. In today's Gospel, John once again must be the bearer of a message of patience. It was not he, but one coming after who was the Messiah.

For Israel, the waiting was at times endless and filled with sorrow. Yet faith in the guiding light of God's promised covenant kept them going. All of us know this type of waiting in our lives, whether it's waiting to meet that special someone, for that promotion, or for the arrival of a child. Oftentimes we eventually get the result we want, and the joy is indescribable. Other times we are devastated by disappointment. Yet all the readings today emphasize that even during the times of waiting we are to rejoice heartily.

For me, the Advent hymn "O come, O come Emmanuel" is a staple of the season that typifies this angst. The first verse quotes our first reading, comparing Israel to a prisoner, awaiting release from captivity. Then the opposite feeling in the repeated refrain emphasizes the joy when freedom does come: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel-God with us! He is here!

Perhaps the reason we are so quick to fly through Advent on our way to Christmas is because we are assured of Jesus' birth. We already know how the story ends on Christmas Day. Yet for Ancient Israel, the only knowledge of the story's end was through their faith. Most generations would never know a world where the Messiah had come.

This Sunday, perhaps we can reflect on what the joy of Christmas would be if we didn't know how the story ends. Would we, like Ancient Israel, keep our faith in the covenant if we didn't have the guarantee of the presents being under the wrapping? Would we be so quick to put up lights and sing carols in October if the event we celebrate hadn't already happened? Why, after all, do we wait?

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Thanks for cultivating joyful patience with us during this season of Advent waiting. This week's reflection was presented by Jesuit Connections, a program of the Office of Ignatian Spirituality. Join us next week for the final installment of our Advent audio retreat, as we explore "Discomfort, Curiosity, and Responding to God."

Reflection questions:

- Can I recall a time when I had to wait for something. How can I relate that to this season of waiting?
 - In what ways do I honor this waiting period before Christmas? Do I allow "Christmas creep" to overshadow the sacredness of Advent and how could I change that this year?
 - Do I rejoice at all times even in the waiting, as today's readings call us to do? What are some ways that I can find joy in my own waiting, not knowing, like the people of Israel, when the wait will be over?
 - How can I take action and actively maintain hope and joy, not knowing when the light will be coming?
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Opening & Closing Prayers

"Gaudete" by Brad Reynolds, SJ

Because Christmas is almost here
Because dancing fits so well with music
Because inside baby clothes are miracles.

Gaudete

Because some people love you
Because of chocolate
Because pain does not last forever
Because Santa Claus is coming.

Gaudete

Because of laughter
Because there really are angels
Because your fingers fit your hands
Because forgiveness is yours for the asking
Because of children
Because of parents.

Gaudete

Because the blind see.
Because the lame walk.

Gaudete

Because lepers are clean
And the deaf hear.

Gaudete

Because the dead will live again
And there is good news for the poor.

Gaudete

Because of Christmas
Because of Jesus
You Rejoice.

"First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt. To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!