

# Waiting for God to Act

Brian Zahnd

**A**dvent is for waiting. As we tell the story of redemption through the church calendar we begin our telling of the sacred story, not with doing, not with celebrating, but with waiting—**waiting for God to act.**

Yet most of us—children of a high-tech, high-speed, instantaneous age—are not very good at waiting. It feels too much like doing nothing, and we are the driven ones who take pride in being busy. Waiting is not really our thing.

Or worse yet, waiting feels too much like lamenting, which is closer to the truth. With the loss of a strong sense of the Christian calendar we have conflated Advent and Christmas into a single “holiday season.” But the truth is that **Advent is quite different from Christmas as it carries its strong theme of prophetic lament.** The world has gone wrong, justice lies fallen in the streets, and it seems that God is nowhere to be found. That’s when the lamentation of waiting arises in our soul: “*O Lord, how long?*” From Isaiah to Malachi there is a consistent theme of waiting in lament for God to act. All of the Hebrew prophets, each in their own way, composed their prophetic poems around this recurring theme: The Lord is coming, God is about to act, but for now...we wait.

And yet the waiting is essential. For it’s in the waiting that our soul grows quiet and contemplative and cultivates a capacity for awareness by which we can discern what God is doing when he does act.

We have been seduced by an idolatry that deceives us into thinking that God is mostly found in the big and loud, when in fact, God is almost never found in the big and loud. The ways of God are predominantly small and quiet. *The ways of God are about as loud as seed falling on the ground or bread rising in an oven.* The ways of God are almost never found in the shouts of the crowd; the ways of God are more often found in trickling tears and whispered

So we are waiting for God to act, but *I would suggest that we are not so much waiting for God to act as we are waiting to become contemplative enough to discern what God is doing.*

God is always acting, because God is always loving his creation. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always inviting us into their house of love. But when we are consumed by anger, harried by anxiety, and driven by impatience, we are blind and deaf to what God is actually



prayers. We want God to do a big thing, while God is planning to do a small thing. We are impressed by the big and loud. God is not. We are in a hurry. God is not. We want God to act fast, but Godspeed is almost always slow.

doing in the present moment.

When God broke into history decisively through the Incarnation, who discerned it? Not the Pharisees whose religious movement was loudly predicting that God was about to act. Not the scribes and priests

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who were the professional experts in prophetic scripture.

Instead it was pagan stargazers and peasant shepherds who discerned what God was doing. They were not the experts and they were not the reactionaries at the loud center of religious noise; they were quiet people on the silent edges of contemplative thought.

Gazing at stars and keeping watch by night are profound metaphors for the contemplative life. To most people, it would appear that the Magi and the shepherds were doing nothing of significance in their long nighttime vigils, but they were the ones who were able to discern what God was doing. It was contemplative stargazers and shepherds, having learned how to wait in silence, who found their way to Bethlehem. They were the ones who discerned what God was doing in the seemingly ordinary event of a young woman giving birth in an out of the way place.

**Waiting for God to act** only seems like waiting for God to act. God is always acting because *God is always loving the world and always giving birth to something*. Waiting for God to act is actually waiting for your soul to become quiet enough and contemplative enough to discern what God is doing in the obscure and forgotten corners, far from the corridors of power or wherever you think the action is.

We want God to act in the imperial capital of Rome, but God first acts in a stable on the edge of Bethlehem.

We want God to act in Washington, DC, but God first acts in the quiet corner of your own living room.

So, let me say this to you quite confidently: **God is about to act**. God is about to act in your life and in our world. But if you want to discern the actions of God you must learn to first wait in quiet contemplation.

Before you can become an activist, you must first become a contemplative; otherwise you'll just be a re-activist. And re-activists merely recycle anger and keep the world an angry place. Jesus was a contemplative activist, but never a re-activist.

So, learn to gaze at the stars. Learn to keep vigil in the fields. Learn to sit with Jesus. Learn to be quiet. Learn to wait. Then, and only then, will you begin to discern what God is doing.

May this Advent help prepare you to discern what God is about to do in your life and in our world. □

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## God With Us by Eden Jersak

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flung his doors open to me! This young woman spoke directly to those diminishing messages of doubt that I had been listening to for days—and the kicker—this young Ugandan woman, who I crossed paths with randomly on a trip to South Africa, was named “Blessing,” so appropriately named by her mother!

Brad and I have recently been overtaken by situations and circumstances that could leave us asking the wrong question and forgetting God’s history and record of being there with us.

Instead, I am standing in a spacious place—an open space where God’s grace and glory allow me to stand tall and even shout praise!

### Meditation

In closing, I offer some questions that I hope will bring to remembrance your “God stories.”

1. Do you feel vulnerable to getting stuck in the question, “Is God with me or not?” If so, what might that cost you?

2. Do you have some “God stories”—instances where you felt God’s nearness to you—where you recognized that Christ is Emmanuel: God with you?

3. When was the last time you shared that story with someone else or spent time reflecting on it for yourself? What is the fruit of remembering and sharing?

4. Take a bit of time to recall one of your “God stories.” Try to remember the details as best you can. How did that change your life that day? How does it change your life today? What was God’s message to you in that encounter?

5. Do you know someone else who might need to hear that message? Tell them your story—remember the generosity of God, remember how close and present he is to you always!

Remember, Christ is your Emmanuel—*God with you!* □

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