

## Hope in the Time Between: An Advent Reading Guide

If you've ever been lost while walking through a forest, then you'll know just how alarming that sense of disorientation can be. The trees seem to cloister, their branches reaching out, as you scramble to find anything that looks familiar, anything to push back the rising panic threatening to crest and fall like an unrelenting wave. The light filtering through the leaves no longer carries the soft warmth it once did but, rather, serves as an ominous reminder of the fading daylight and approaching dark. Things bear a sinister edge when you're lost.

What you need in those disoriented moments of panic is perspective. You need the vantage point found at the top of a hill or in the upper limbs of a tree to provide purchase for your sanity as you regain a proper sense of direction. Only when the miles behind and the destination ahead become clear are you able to move your feet confidently toward home.

It is a terrible thing to be lost. Perhaps you have felt that way a great deal over these last several months, hoping that once you finally come over the next rise in the road, you'll feel confident but, instead, find yourself more confused than ever before, holding questions that pound like a drum over and over again in your mind. What's true? How should I respond when it seems like conflict is the only language anyone speaks? Why is there so much fear? What does it mean to be a Christian in this mess? What might God be doing in all of this?

We need high ground, a space to consider where we've been and where we're heading so that we can rightly fix our location and forge ahead. Advent offers us that vantage point. Conflict, confusion, and a sense of disorientation are nothing new for the Church. Karl Barth once said, "What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?" What did he mean by that? Fleming Rutledge answers for us:

"Advent calls for a life lived on the edge, so to speak, all the time, shaped by the cross not only on Good Friday but wherever and whenever we are, proclaiming his death to be the turn of the ages "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The gospel is incarnate in our lives in "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4), not in a faraway empyrean but in "the sufferings of this present time," which are endured because of the promise that they "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18)

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in *the time between* the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead...Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our

faith requires.

The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.” (Rutledge, *Advent*, 7.)

The tide of ages has transformed the curve of the coastline where the Kingdom of God meets a world groaning in anticipation of a coming glory, but it is here that the Church remains stationed. There is still the siren song of idols that has been sung for innumerable generations. There is still the intoxicating aroma of power and wealth that invites us to abandon all in our pursuit. There is still the language of pride with which we recite our corporate creeds as we worship at the shrines of our base desires. This is the ground the Church occupies. This is the ground the Church has occupied since Christ told us to wait and watch, and so we wait and watch and hope.

Here we find the somber beauty of Advent: as we wait, we remember. We remember that our Savior's hard-won victory over sin and death and our Enemy is assured but not yet ours in full. We remember that the pain we might feel now vanishes like a vapor when held up to the glorious light of eternity. We remember that love and peace and joy and hope aren't just seasonal vocabulary embroidered on dish towels, but they are the language of the Kingdom that has come and one day will come. So as we anticipate our celebration of Christ's birth, let us get our bearings as men and women who are situated precisely in this in-between, acknowledging the grief of sin, anticipating the glory of eternity, and allowing the holy beauty of our promise-keeping God to shape our hope in the midst of it all. May we, filled with joyful anticipation at the coming of Christ, spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere this Advent season (2 Cor 2:14).

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*It is our sincere hope that this guide provides you with a tool which will serve you well as you dedicate time and space in your life to sit with the Lord this Advent season. These meditations, musings, and questions are intended as a means of encouraging you, challenging you, and pointing you toward the power and beauty of communion with the Lord as you spend time in God's Word. We all need hope and comfort and rest right now. We trust that the Lord will be faithful to meet you as you seek Him. May the somber yet hopeful honesty of Advent, and the celebratory joy of Christmas, strengthen your faith and heighten your anticipation of the glorious return of King Jesus.*