

“Waiting for the Magic”

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Princeton Theological Seminary, Miller Chapel

I'm aware that the season of Advent can mean different things to different people. For some of you, it may be that time of the year when you can begin to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. For others, it means breaking out that dusty Advent wreath from the attic and beginning the yearly candle-lighting ritual with family. And unfortunately, for many of us, Advent reminds us that the semester is drawing to a close, papers need to be written, exams studied for, Christmas gifts prepared or purchased, and life is full steam ahead through the commercial craziness of December.

During this season, the first thing that comes to my mind is Advent calendars. Growing up, starting on December 1st, my sister and I couldn't go to bed until we had gone through our Advent calendars. Unfortunately, these weren't the cool Advent calendars with miniature chocolates or prizes hidden behind the numbered paper doors. Nope. The only prize my sister and I found was the chance to memorize a Bible verse. Granted, I found this both challenging and fun as a 7 year old, but 7 years later as a freshman in high school, with the same Advent calendar and its half-torn, half-taped-on paper doors – let's just say Advent had lost some of its *magic* for me.

In many ways, that's what I always thought Advent was – a time when we were waiting for the *magic to happen*. There seems to be plenty of magical things happening in this story and in our Christmas culture – a teenage girl who *magically* becomes pregnant; a jolly, bearded man who *magically* is able to deliver presents worldwide; *magical* flying creatures appearing to shepherds; the *magic* of twinkling lights and flying reindeer; and a baby, the little Lord Jesus, who when awakened by a cow's moo, *magically* no crying he makes.

Advent is a time when we look for that magic, when we look forward, instead of backward. We look to the coming of the Christ child, full of expectancy, fully anticipating a great celebration like the one that once took place in the sky above the shepherds' fields just outside of Bethlehem – surely a *magical* moment.

Yet, the more I think about it, Advent really isn't that much different from the rest of the year. Sure, we wait during Advent – we wait for the birth of God-with-us and we look forward to the birth of a new reality. But when Christmas is over, when life gets back to normal, we don't stop waiting, we don't stop hoping and we don't stop expecting the coming of the kingdom of God. We are constantly overwhelmed by news of floods, wars, shootings in malls and churches, and we await the new heavens and new earth, we await the in-breaking of God's alternative reality. In many ways, like in Advent, we are always waiting for *the magic to happen...*

But magic doesn't just *happen* in Advent, it doesn't just *happen* in the Christmas story. As exotic as shepherds and sheep might be to some of us, there is also something very mundane about it all. Two years ago, I spent the summer living with a Palestinian family in Beit Sahour, a suburb of Bethlehem. My backyard for that summer was, literally, the Shepherd's Fields – where, as tradition has it, the shepherds were greeted by the angelic messengers. As I would walk home from work each day, I would pass the Shepherd's Fields and what once sounded so magical, so out of the ordinary, gradually became part of my daily routine.

So often we think that *magic* happens solely because of what God does. But the story of Advent gives us a different idea. It shows us people who are working for the magic, laboring to make it happen, people who are partnering with God to bring about something new, *something magical*. Mary partners with God, in a way like no other, and gives birth to the baby Jesus. Shepherds and wise men come to give their aid in the watching over and worshipping of the newborn baby. Joseph, who probably shouldn't have been seen with Mary, stays with her and partners with both Mary and God in the raising of God's son. Jesus is born – not by any magic – but through the labor of one, young, teenage girl.

So **perhaps** the greatest story ever told is not so much a story about magic; perhaps it's a story of humanity partnering with God. **Perhaps** it's not so much about God having it all planned out and orchestrated, but rather about people working with God and helping to bring about God's kingdom. **Perhaps** Advent is a time when amidst the darkness, amidst the waiting, amidst the rampant consumerism of Christmas, we are reminded of our role to play in the ever-unfolding drama of God. A drama that is still waiting to be written.

The scripture today asks the question, “what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?”

While often we think of Advent as a season of waiting, perhaps sitting around and just waiting for God to bring about the magic isn't the most faithful position we can take. Yes, we wait for the birth of Jesus during Advent, and yes we wait for the coming of the kingdom of God...Because we can't do it all by ourselves. But the story of Advent isn't only one of waiting. It is also one of movement and action. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, the shepherds make their way to the stables and the magi embark on their long journey. The story of Advent reminds us that as often as we have to wait, we also have to act.

Thankfully, we don't have to act alone. As communities of faith; as students, faculty, and staff; as friends, peers and colleagues, we partner with God as the body of Christ, and come together to encourage one another and be nourished.

And so we come to this table. It's not a magic table. It's just bread from Wegmans and grape juice; nothing we haven't had before. But we come to this table to meet God, and to meet one another. To be nourished and fed for the journey that lies ahead of us, and to remember that God goes with us.

What sort of people ought we to be? I don't know exactly. But as I understand the Advent story, it seems as though we're called to be people who partner with God. As we sang earlier, *the dawn is drawing near, the world is about to turn*. Advent reminds us that despite the hype, despite the commercials, the season isn't about magic. It's about the ordinariness of life mixing with the holy power of God to bring newness and life into the world. **Thanks be to God.**