

Awaiting God's reign

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue



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The large Christmas tree in Macy's department store in downtown Chicago (formerly Marshall Field's) was lighted in a festive public ceremony on November 2, two days after Halloween and almost eight weeks before Christmas. The event made me think of an observation about Americans that Henri Nouwen made after he'd lived and taught in the United States for decades. We are not very good at waiting, Nouwen noted. In fact, most people consider waiting to be a huge waste of time. The culture says don't just sit there—do something!

Patience is not one of our stronger characteristics. A flight delay at the airport, an unanticipated traffic jam on the freeway or a doctor's appointment that leaves us too long in the waiting room can become an emotional and physical crisis, bringing with it stress, a racing heart and elevated blood pressure.

Our culture celebrates action, results and instant gratification. Relentless and highly sophisticated advertising convinces us that we deserve to have whatever we want *now*. As a result, Nouwen observed, waiting is an awful desert between where we are and where we want to be.

Yet waiting is a major biblical theme. "I wait for the Lord all day long," the psalmist wrote. Then there's the promise of Isaiah 40: "Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

The interesting thing about biblical waiting is that it almost always happens in situations that are bleak. People wait while they are in captivity, prisoners in a foreign land. Defeated, expelled from their homes and their beloved city, their beautiful temple in ruins, they are described by the prophet as “sitting in deep darkness.” We sing about those people and about ourselves in gorgeous Advent hymns: “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile.”

Near the end of his life Jesus began to prepare his disciples for something that was still to come. He told his followers to wait hopefully and actively anticipate the future. “Watch. Stand up. Stay awake. Be alert.” Christians trust that something is coming that is not yet fully here: redemption, fulfillment, wholeness, peace and the world as God intends it. The reign of God will be characterized by peace among nations and justice for all people—particularly for oppressed people. In this world, old and young will be secure and safe, little ones will not be shot in random street violence, people will not suffer for lack of access to adequate health care, and weapons will be melted down and recast into farm implements.

That’s why we do some serious waiting during Advent. Yes, Advent waiting is patient and unhurried, to be sure. But it is also living into the promised future. Advent waiting is gently but steadily working for the reign of God here and now. It is waiting for the birth of a child, and working for the future that that child promised and embodied and taught and lived.