

Endless Advent (Luke 2:1-20; Nativity of the Lord)

And how will we know it's Christmas?

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#)

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"Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Letters from Prison*. "One waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are of no real consequence—the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside."

Perhaps being shut in quarantine is a kind of Advent, too: waiting, hoping, and doing many things that seem to have no real consequence. It sounds all too familiar. 2020 has felt like week after week of an old-school, medieval Advent— complete with penance, contrition, exile, and apocalyptic visions.

What does that mean for Christians when Christmas arrives? A jail sentence is over when, as Bonhoeffer writes, the door is "opened from the outside" and the prisoner is set free. (Or, more ominously, when a sentence ends in death, as Bonhoeffer's did.) The liturgical season of Advent ends, clearly and definitely, at Christmas. But we don't really know when the Advent of 2020 will come to an end.

We don't know when an effective vaccine will be widely available and administered to most people. We don't know when or how the political strife and uncertainty of these recent times will be ended or healed. We don't know how or when the work of so many for racial justice will materialize into policy changes or reforms.

This year, maybe Christians in the developed world will finally find ourselves with the tables turned, when those in the developing world can plausibly ask [if we know that](#)

[it's Christmas](#). We may be wondering this ourselves: Is this Christmas? Does it feel like Christmas? So much of what we are waiting for in our personal lives, communities, and nation are things that we will still be waiting for after Christmas, and for quite a long time afterward.

When this long Advent of 2020 (and let's face it, 2021 and beyond) comes to end, how will we know? What will that Christmas feel like? It won't be a single day, like waking up to presents under the tree, or a prison door swung open, or a day when "everything is normal" again.

On the night Jesus was born, it wasn't that everything suddenly became safe or peaceful. The Roman Empire continued; war, disease, and poverty were not eliminated. And yet, a new door on the journey toward salvation was opened. God came to earth, to live and die as one of us and to teach us about a different kind of freedom—a freedom to love without fear of death, pain, or shame. Jesus tells the disciples, "I am the door," in the King James translation of John 10:9: "by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." There is no longer any prison or lockdown that can take our truest freedom, our relationship with our God. Bonhoeffer also wrote in *Letters from Prison*, "May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may he lead us to himself."

And as the season of Advent tries to remind us every year, we will in fact always be living in the season of Advent—because, in the end, the only one who will open the door to the other side of the kingdom, on a day we do not know, is Christ.