

THE MEANING IS
IN THE WAITING

PAULA GOODER

THE MEANING IS
IN THE WAITING

the spirit of advent

foreword by

LAUREN F. WINNER



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*For Martin and Carol Gooder,
my father and mother in life as well as in faith,
with love*

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FOREWORD

I am a church-nerd, and I love Advent. I love the morning in early December when people of all ages turn up at my church and bend over long tables stacked with styrofoam rounds and pine boughs and make Advent wreaths to light at home. I love singing “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” adding another verse each week as we wind our way toward Christmas. I love praying the collect for the fourth Sunday of Advent, beseeching God to “purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son our Lord cometh, he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.” I want to be a mansion.

I love Advent because I am obsessed with the ecclesial calendar, with the church’s seasons and the rhythm they make. I believe in church time. I think I will finally allow that I actually am a Christian, and not just aspiring to be one, when the rhythms of the church year come to me without thinking, when they come more naturally to me than the rhythms of the academic calendar (which tells me that September, not Advent, is the beginning of the year) or the rhythms of the calendar of the U.S. government (which has imprinted on my soul the four days on which self-employed people pay estimated taxes).

American culture gives us lots of cues about how to live inside time. Chiefly, we are told to spend it (have you ever noticed that almost all the verbs we pair with time are borrowed from the worlds of finance—spend, save, manage . . .). We are told, by advertisements and by our Blackberries, to squeeze time dry, to use it well, to maximize it.

The church tells us a different story about time—it is God's, and there is enough of it, more than enough. The church's narrative about time is never clearer than during Advent, when we are invited to spend our time very foolishly indeed. We are invited to wait. Just to wait.

In this winsome yet provocative Advent devotional, Paula Gooder takes us into the fraught complications of Advent waiting—waiting for Christmas, in a world that starts celebrating it months ahead of time; waiting for Jesus' birth, an event that has already happened; and waiting for the return of Christ, the consummation of God's plan (a drama that some days, we may doubt will ever happen at all, and other days, we may want to forestall as long as possible). I have worked my way through Gooder's Advent reflections, and I will look forward to rereading them each Advent for many years to come.

It is commonplace to bemoan how hard it is to wait: Americans aren't good at it—we can't stand even waiting in line, we carry credit-card debt because we can't wait to buy stuff, and so on. But actually, I think we get a lot of

practice at waiting. And I don't just mean the mundane waiting I did this week—waiting for three phone calls, waiting for my nails (newly periwinkle) to dry. I mean, we wait for God. We wait better or less well, with more intention or more distraction, but we wait for God a lot. We wait for God finally to hear those prayers we say all the time for someone's cancer, for someone's heartbreak, for peace and justice in this country, this neighborhood, this family; we wait because it all seems in rather short supply, this peace and succor and health. We wait and wait and wait. Most of the year, while we wait, we also work—we work for the Kingdom of God, helping to bring it about. During Advent, we set aside some of our work and focus on the waiting. During Advent, we remember how sacred a calling is this waiting.

While sitting inside Gooder's reflections, I began to sense something I had not understood before, in any of my other Advent observances: it is not just we who wait. God is waiting, too. "The Lord wait[s], that He may be gracious unto you," says Isaiah, one of the prophets who interests Gooder most. God waits on us, for our attention, for our visits home; God waits for our vision and our ear.

"God's waiting and man's," wrote the nineteenth-century British minister Alexander MacLaren, in a reflection on Isaiah 30:18. How "bold and beautiful, that He and we should be represented as sharing the same attitude." Here, then, is something of the mystery

of incarnation: God's being like us is not limited to God's taking on feet and hands and hair. God is like us in this posture of pause and expectance and anticipation and longing and wondering where we are. And so Advent is not only about our waiting for God, waiting for God to get born, waiting for God to come back. It is also a time when we enter God's waiting, God's divine waiting. And perhaps that is where the meaning of waiting gleams the most brightly of all.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book aims to offer food for thought around the theme of waiting during Advent. It is not a detailed exegesis of the text—commentaries provide much better exegesis than I could here—nor is it a practical guide to waiting. Instead, it is a series of reflections inspired by the Bible that, I hope, will stimulate you to think a little more about waiting: why we do it; what it feels like to be someone who waits; what happens when we don't wait; and why God might want us to get better at it. This book also asks questions about what it might have been like for the biblical characters to wait. It does not seek to provide answers but to open up questions and to offer new ideas and ways of looking at things.

The biblical reflections occasionally delve into the history behind the text, but, as a rule, they treat the text as it is in its final form. This is not the place to engage in detailed exploration of whether the biblical characters did or did not say what they are supposed to have said, or whether the biblical authors have changed the sources available to them. We have the text that we do and my reflections take it at face value. You will need to turn to more detailed commentaries and other scholarly works for questions of authenticity and authorship.

This book is a volume of reflections, not a “how to” manual. If you want an easy fix for a busy, impatient life, this is not the book for you, but if you want to spend Advent reflecting on waiting, thinking about what happens when you wait, and accompanying Abraham and Sarah, the prophets, John the Baptist, and Mary in their waiting, then you might find something here to interest you. When I began writing the book, I tried to include questions that would help readers, who wanted them, to apply the reflections to their own life. It soon became clear that this wouldn’t work. Waiting is not something that you can learn in five, ten, or even twenty-four steps. It is a frame of mind, not an “activity,” a way of being, not a list of tasks. This book aims to persuade you of the virtue of waiting but also to give you food for thought that might contribute to your life of reflection and prayer so that, in the presence of God, you might grow more fully into a way of being that is governed more by waiting than by urgency and lived more in the present than in the future. This is not a manifesto for doing nothing—waiting can be immensely active—but for changing the focus of our lives from ourselves to God and from the future to the present. Such a transformation takes time and for most of us will be our life’s work, born out of years of companionship with the God who waits with us.

You will notice that, after an introductory reflection on waiting, there are four chapters: one for each week

of Advent. Each chapter is divided into six sections with a brief introduction and conclusion. This allows you to read one section a day from the first day of December to Christmas Eve, or to begin four full weeks before Christmas and to read one a day (with a day off each week). The chapters can also be read all the way through if that suits your pattern better. Each chapter is focused around the biblical character most associated with each of the four candles on the Advent wreath:

- The first chapter looks at Abraham and Sarah as examples of the fathers and mothers of the faith and of people whose calling draws them into a lifetime of waiting for the fulfilment of God's promise to them;
- The second chapter explores the prophets and their expectation of God's intervention in the world that was sometimes longed for and sometimes feared;
- The third chapter turns to John the Baptist, whose ministry existed between the old and the new and pointed to things beyond himself;
- And the fourth chapter looks at Mary, whose whole life was shaped by waiting for events beyond her control.

Each of the six sections in each chapter opens with a verse that will shape the core of my reflection that

follows it. This is followed with a reference to the wider Bible passage for those who would like to read the whole passage by way of preparation for that section. Each section is a reflection inspired by the biblical passage and explores the themes that occurred to me while I was studying it.

A reflection on waiting

Much to my surprise as I was writing it, the Introduction turned into an extended reflection on waiting and the biblical view of time. I had not intended to begin the book in this way, but these were the words that wanted to be written and, once they were written, it seemed important to include them, because they explain some of the concepts that underpin the biblical stories we will be exploring in the rest of the book.

I hope that some people will find the introduction valuable in exploring some of those knotty issues (like how we can wait for something that has already happened and what it means to be waiting for the end times) that hover in the background, often unexpressed, during Advent. Others, however, may find it off-putting, and to you I would like to say, ignore it! The introduction lays some foundations, but you can read the book without them. If you would rather get into the exploration of the biblical stories straightaway, then do that and skip the introduction entirely. You can, of course, read it later—or indeed not at all—if that is more helpful.

THE MEANING IS
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INTRODUCTION

A REFLECTION ON WAITING



KNEELING

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

R.S. THOMAS

Why wait?

Imagine entering a room and finding a beautifully wrapped present on a table. Attached to the present is a label that reads: “This present is for you but don’t open it now . . . wait.”

An instruction like this might evoke a wide range of emotions, but probably the two most common would be a sense of indignation or frustration and/or a tingle of anticipation. Depending on who we are, we might feel just one emotion—entirely irritated or completely intrigued—but I, at least, would have a complex combination of the two: irritation tinged with anticipation or eagerness laced with frustration.

In reality, I wonder how many of us would obey the command to wait. Waiting is not something most of us do easily. Our frustrations at waiting begin at an early age and are hard to outgrow. When I tell my own children to wait, and see on their faces that familiar expression that borders on emotional agony, I recognize it, not so much because I remember feeling that way when I was their age—although I do—but because I still feel that way now and am less able to express it quite so openly.

Antipathy to waiting is exacerbated, if not encouraged, by the world in which we live. All around us we encounter, day after day, the encouragement not to wait but to have what we want now. Our credit-driven society urges us to abandon all thought of waiting and to buy now; so many advertisements have as their underlying

message “why wait?” Improvements in communication only erode the notion of waiting further. We are told that people feel aggrieved if they have to wait for more than twenty-four hours to receive a reply from an e-mail, and mobile phones help us to be available even when we are away from home. Waiting is increasingly a strange notion. We have become accustomed to immediacy and swift action.

Given all of this, it seems almost ludicrous that the church should have Advent, four weeks dedicated to waiting. Is this not the church, yet again, looking backward to bygone days, to ideas irrelevant to our society, out of touch and out of date? Would it not be a better idea to abandon Advent altogether? There are some who would argue that in effect we have already done so. Barely a year goes by without people telling stories of the time when Advent really was Advent: when Christmas trees were set up on Christmas Eve and not before; when Christmas carols were, likewise, sung on Christmas Eve and for the following days of Christmas—and not in November. When this happened, we are told, Advent could be properly Advent and Christmas, Christmas; and we weren’t all fed up with Christmas by the twenty-fifth of December.

What seems to have happened is that the tingle of anticipation, that looking forward to Christmas brings, has encouraged us to “anticipate” Christmas in another sense, not in the sense of “look forward to” but in the

sense of “bringing it forward and beginning celebrations early.” This is certainly true in shops where, as people often observe, Christmas decorations seem to appear earlier and earlier every year so that we have barely returned from our summer holidays when we are entangled in yards of tinsel. Preparation for Christmas means, for many people, beginning Christmas early. I was amazed last year to find a box of mince pies in a supermarket in September, with a consume-by date of the end of October. Not only were we to buy our mince pies early, we were to eat them early too.

On celebrating Advent

So what are we to do? It might appear that the only solution is for churches to become guardians of Christmas and of Advent: to issue edicts banning the singing of Christmas carols and the eating of mince pies before the twenty-fourth of December; to patrol people’s houses to insure that they do not set up their Christmas trees too early, insuring that Christmas does not begin before its time. This would hardly be popular or desirable. Culture and expectations have changed, and the celebration of Christmas is now widely accepted as beginning at least halfway through December if not even earlier. It appears curmudgeonly to insist on beginning Christmas at the “right” time and it is almost certainly a fruitless exercise.

Does this mean, therefore, that we should abandon Advent? Should we simply accept that Advent is no

longer in tune with our culture and abandon all pretence of observing it, with the possible exception of the odd chocolate-laden Advent calendar? Obviously not, but it does raise the question of *how* we celebrate Advent in a way that enhances the season and the month of December and that enables us to “anticipate” Christmas properly in the sense of looking forward to it, preparing ourselves, and becoming ready, rather than in the sense of starting early.

An active waiting in the present

Part of the clue to a reinvigorated and renewed vision of Advent lies in waiting; a waiting that rests not in frustration but in stillness; not in frenzied anticipation but in an embracing of the present. If we want to appreciate Advent fully, we need to relearn how to wait, to rediscover the art of savoring the future, of staying in the present and of finding meaning in the act of waiting.

It was only when I was pregnant with my first child that I realized that I had completely misunderstood what waiting was about. I have a very low boredom threshold and, consequently, am very bad at waiting. Waiting makes me anxious, restless, and uneasy. Imagine my bemusement then to encounter an experience that is entirely about waiting. No one who is expecting a child wants the waiting to end and the baby to come early—that can only spell heartache. The only thing to do in pregnancy is to wait, and not only that but to hope against hope that the period of waiting does not end prematurely. It

was during this period of enforced waiting that I began to discover that waiting is not just about passing the time between the moment when expectation is raised and when it comes to completion—in this instance between conception and birth—but that it has deep and lasting value in and of itself.

As I waited for the birth of my baby, I discovered that waiting can be a nurturing time, valuable in its own right. Until then, I had assumed that waiting could only be passive, that it involved sitting around, drumming my fingers, completely powerless to do anything until the moment of waiting passed and I could be active again. How wrong I was. The waiting of pregnancy is about as active an occupation as one can hope to engage in. Pregnant waiting is a profoundly creative act, involving a slow growth to new life. This kind of waiting may appear passive externally but internally consists of never-ending action and is a helpful analogy for the kind of waiting that Advent requires. For many of us, Advent is such a busy time with all our preparations for Christmas that the thought of stopping and sitting passively—while attractive in many ways—is simply impossible. Advent, however, does not demand passivity but the utmost activity: active internal waiting that knits together new life.

One of the other things I learned during pregnancy was that learning to savor the time of waiting allows us also to appreciate the event when it comes. The loss of an ability to wait often brings with it the inability to be

fully and joyfully present now. Instead, we are constantly looking backward to better times we used to know and forward to better times that may be coming. The more we do this, the more we miss the present. Not only that, but it becomes hard to appreciate the future moment even when it does come. Many people speak of the feeling of deep anticlimax on Christmas Day when that long-anticipated day does not live up to expectations. Often the reason for this is that we live forever in the future, so that, when the future becomes the present, we are ill-equipped to deal with it and have lost the ability to be fully present, right now.

One of the many reasons we wait in Advent is to hone our skills of being joyfully and fully present now. After a month of doing this, Christmas Day can gain a depth and meaning that would otherwise fly past in a whirl of presents and mince pies.

Such deep attention to the present cannot help but transform us as we learn—or relearn as the case may be—how to live deeply and truly in the present moment, so that we are content to linger in our lives as they are now and not be forever looking forward, striving onward to the next goal. This introduction began with R.S. Thomas’s famous poem “Kneeling,” from which the title of this book is drawn. In it he articulates the fact that sometimes the really profound moments of our lives occur “in between” at that moment just before something happens: truth lurks in the moment between the

out breath and the in breath or in the moment just before someone speaks. As Thomas recognizes in his poem, the paradox is that sometimes the fulfillment of that for which we wait robs us of what we were waiting for and that we discover to our surprise that the meaning is in the waiting and not in the fulfillment.

Once we recognize this, it becomes clear that Advent is not an irrelevant, cultural dinosaur but is vital for our very well-being. If we are able, during Advent, to relearn the skill of waiting, then it will have value not only for Advent and Christmas, but for the whole of our lives. Advent offers us a gift of such importance that it is life transforming; it is not so much a season as a way of being. As is often the case with the festivals of the church's year, in Advent we are invited into a deeper, truer encounter with ourselves, with the world, and, most of all, with God. Although learning the lessons of the season will help us to celebrate the season better, even more important is the fact that they polish our skills, sharpen our insight, and deepen our walk with God in such a way that the whole of our life is affected. Advent invites us to focus on, learn, and relearn a skill essential to our Christian journey.

Waiting for the past

Recognizing the importance of waiting, however, does not solve all our problems with Advent waiting. One of the oddest features of Advent is that it requires us to wait for something that has already happened, as well

as for something that has not. It is the double vision of Advent that we look both backward with expectation as we wait for the birth of Christ 2,000 years ago and also forward with anticipation to the end times. The awkwardness of Advent is enhanced by the expectation that we not only wait for the past, which seems impossible, but also for the end times—a doctrine that many people find increasingly uncomfortable and hard to talk about.

The clue to understanding the requirements of Advent-waiting lies in the Bible and the biblical view of history. One of the features that often confuses people when they read the Bible is the fact that it appears to conflate different events into a single time. Take for example Psalm 74:12–17:

Yet God my King is from of old,
 working salvation in the earth.
 You divided the sea by your might;
 you broke the heads of the dragons
 in the waters.
 You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
 you gave him as food for the
 creatures of the wilderness.
 You cut openings for springs and torrents;
 you dried up ever-flowing streams.
 Yours is the day, yours also the night;
 you established the luminaries and the sun.
 You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
 you made summer and winter.

What event is being referred to in this passage? The passage is resonant of creation. The reference to God's breaking the heads of the dragons and crushing the head of Leviathan may refer to an ancient and alternative version of the creation account in which God wrestled dragons during the act of creation. Alongside this rather odd reference we also have the much more familiar reference to God's establishing the luminaries and the sun, fixing the bounds of the earth, and making summer and winter. On one level, these verses refer to God as creator. If we go back and look again, however, the reference to dividing the sea with your might and drying up ever-flowing streams seems to be a reference to the crossing of the Red Sea. Yet one more reading of the passage seems to suggest an allusion to Moses striking the rock in the wilderness to produce a stream of water in "you cut openings for springs and torrents." So which is it? Which of these biblical events lies behind this passage? The answer is all of them.

Verse 12 describes God as "working salvation in the earth." This conflated account of God's working of salvation indicates that in the mind of the psalmist these are all effectively the same event, or at least so close as to be regarded as overlapping. This is bemusing to us because our view of history is almost completely different from this. Modern, western twenty-first-century views of history largely regard history as linear. What this means is that at one end of the line is creation, at the other is

the end of the world, and we are placed upon this line somewhere between the beginning and the end. History proceeds along the line in a single direction, and we can never go back. The biblical view of history appears to differ from this. Salvation history is not so much linear as cyclical. The telling of the history of God's interaction with the world is probably best likened to a snowball, if that image is not too odd. Imagine making a snowball at the top of a hill and then pushing it to make it roll down the hill to the bottom. As the snowball descends it rolls round and round, picking up more snow as it goes. The snowball is still the same, though it gets larger as it rolls. Salvation history is a little like this. God's interventions in the world are regarded as similar events, if not the same one. Each time this occurs, God's act of salvation picks up another resonance or expression so that the psalmist can in all honesty describe God's salvation in terms of the odd mix of creation, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the wilderness tradition.

This also makes much more sense of the descriptions of Jesus in the Gospels. People are often bemused and a little troubled that Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels in terms of events from the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. The suggestion made by some is that this means the stories about Jesus have been fabricated. Much more likely is the fact that the Gospel writers are standing in this same tradition of biblical salvation history that sees Jesus' presence on earth as yet one more—though

even more wonderful—example of God’s intervention in the world. Thus Jesus’ presence *is* creation, Exodus, return from exile (and much more), all rolled into one glorious snowball of salvation.

This is relevant in Advent, because it consequently becomes possible to wait for the past. The snowball of history rolls ever onward: the layer of snow that is Jesus’ ministry is particularly rich and deep, but is not the end. Salvation history continues today. The point of telling and retelling the history of salvation is so that we can recognize it when it breaks into our world. The message of salvation history is that God *is* the kind of God who breaks into our world: creating, liberating, healing, raising from the dead, and saving. God has done it so often through history, and because the snowball rolls on, will do so again, but we need to train ourselves to be able to recognize that creation/Exodus/return from exile/birth of Jesus/resurrection moment when it appears before our eyes. So often God is present in our world, but we fail to recognize it. Elizabeth Barrett Browning summed this up in her poem “Aurora Leigh”:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

It seems a natural part of human nature that we are more predisposed to sit around and pluck blackberries

(or the modern equivalent) than to perceive the presence of God, take off our shoes, and worship.

This can be as true for those of us who want to perceive God's presence as for those who do not. It can be that, despite our best intentions, shimmers of divine presence are overlooked or misinterpreted; we see something that proclaims God's presence in our midst but fail to recognize it for what it is. Part of the purpose of the telling, retelling, and telling again of the history of salvation throughout the Old Testament and into the New is to train us to recognize what it looks like, so that when it does happen again, we not only notice it but understand what it is. The Hebrew word that is often translated *wait* (as in Genesis 49:18, "I wait for your salvation, O LORD") has the additional meaning of "look eagerly" or "lie in wait for" that brings with it that concept of being a "lookout" whose sole task is to gaze into the distance, waiting for a particular person to come, and then, when they do come, to be able to distinguish them from the others who come the same way. The telling and retelling of God's saving acts is one way in which we can begin to recognize that longed-for figure, even when they are still a speck on the horizon.

In Advent, then, we wait for something that has already happened in sure and certain knowledge that it will happen again, and again, and again. It is this certainty that underpins the New Testament concept of hope. In current speech, hope is a vague optimistic feeling: "I hope I'll see you tomorrow." For the biblical

writers, hope carries with it a sense of certainty. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (6:19). This is no fuzzy, good wish but a clear, concrete assertion of reality based, as is so much of Hebrews, in a careful rehearsal of the past, as a means of living well in the present and for the future.

Waiting for the future

The final dimension of Advent that remains, as yet, unexplored is our waiting for the future. The great Advent hymns like “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” point forward to a time in the future when Jesus will return to judge the earth. Indeed, what is believed to be the original version of the hymn as first written by John Cennick (1718–55) has a verse that reads:

Every island, sea, and mountain,
 Heav'n and Earth shall flee away;
 All who hate Him must, confounded
 Hear the trump proclaim the day:
 Come to Judgment! Come to judgment!
 Come to judgment! Come away!

A similar verse can be found in Charles Wesley's even more popular edited version, published in 1758. Although the whole hymn focuses on the end times, this verse brings out the theme of judgment much more clearly than the rest of the hymn; it is, perhaps, telling that neither Cennick's

original nor Wesley's edited verse are commonly included when we sing this hymn during Advent.

For many people the theme of end times and judgment is the equivalent of an embarrassing relative—still present but best ignored. There are two problems that we encounter with beliefs about the end of the world: one is that, despite the active expectation of the earliest Christians, it still hasn't happened; and the other is the gory emphasis on judgment that many find distasteful (an emphasis that is only exacerbated by medieval paintings of the Day of Judgment with all their blood and scenes of agony).

So what are we to do? The most common response to the problems of end-times theology appears to be a quiet ignoring of the theme. With magnificent elegance we ignore the enormous elephant in the room, even when Advent magnifies it so large that our faces are pressed into its sides. Of course, not everyone does ignore the end times, and the interpretation of the end of the world that can be found in certain types of theology—often originating in the United States, and expressed in popular writing such as the *Left Behind* series—does nothing to encourage those who would rather not talk about it to address the issue.

There is no easy answer to the problem, but ignoring it is, in my view, possibly the worst of all solutions. Removing all traces of end-times theology from our preaching and discussion makes a nonsense not only of

our Advent hymns, that proclaim it with such fervour, but of the Bible itself. It is simply not possible to make sense of the biblical themes of justification, salvation, resurrection, kingdom of God, and so on without an accompanying theology of the end; or, to be more accurate, to remove a theology of the end from these themes alters them so radically that they are no longer the themes raised and discussed by Jesus and the earliest Christian communities.

The reappropriation of end-times theology in a way that makes sense of it today is such a large theme that it would require a whole book (if not a series of them) to discuss it properly. Consequently, I intend here to raise one issue that might help us address this vexed Advent question. One of the things that Advent does is invite us to inhabit the biblical worldview of time and of the end. Just as waiting for the past invites us to abandon our sequential model of history in favor of one shaped more like a rolling snowball, so waiting for the future invites us to inhabit a world shaped and informed by a vision of the end. When we do so, we discover some profound answers to our questions, alongside the numerous problems.

The answers proffered by a biblical view of the end speak into the heart of a troubled world shot through with glimmers of God's glory. Why is it that despite our best efforts and determined repentance we cannot act as we wish we could? Why is it that Christian communities experience as much conflict as others do? Why is it

that despite the evident presence of God in our midst we get ground down by the events of the world we live in? For the biblical writers, and particularly Paul, the key to understanding this lies in Jesus' resurrection and its connection to the end times. There were many views of resurrection in the period of Jesus—including the Sadducean view that it would not happen—but where people did believe in it, they were generally agreed that it would take place at the end times on the Day of Judgment.

The significance of Jesus' resurrection (as opposed to the miracles in the Gospels involving the raising of people like Lazarus, who, unlike Jesus, would die again at some point) was that he alone has been raised beforehand. For writers like Luke and Paul this meant that the end times had already begun but had not yet come to completion. God's kingdom had broken in but only partially; the experience of reconciliation in the new creation was now possible, but creation still groaned with longing for its completion. In other words, we are between: between the beginning of the end and the end of the end. This explains why we can have a vision of the world as God yearns for it to be but not the ability to bring it about in full. We can catch a glimpse of human relationship shaped by generous, mutual support but have to live with the reality that this happens only occasionally. In other words, we see glimmers of God's glory in the world but have to wait for the time when that glory will suffuse the whole of creation.

This biblical vision of waiting for the future is one that calls forth both an acceptance of the reality of our current situation and a determination to change it. We live “between” and so must accept the nature of the world as it is now, but we can also grasp hold of God’s possibility for the world. The glimmers of God’s glory that we see exist to strengthen our resolve to increase those glimmers, to strive to make God’s kingdom more present on earth every day. Waiting for the future involves a recognition of what the world might be and the resolve to bring our own part of it one step closer. Yet again waiting becomes active: waiting for the future involves transforming the present.

As I have already said, this does not make many people’s problems with beliefs about the end of the world any easier, but it does remind us what we stand to lose if we abandon the concept entirely. Without a belief in the end times, we lose a theological explanation of the almost-but-not-quite sense that fills so much of Christian experience. We know what could happen, even what ought to happen but cannot quite get there. Belief in the end times is both forgiving (it can’t happen in its fullness because we aren’t there yet) and inspiring (we are aiming for a time when the world will be transformed—so keep on trying—it is worth it).

The element of future waiting in Advent collapses time just as waiting for the past does. Entering the biblical worldview, which focuses on the future culmination in

glory of all our present suffering and woe, changes the present because it invites us to strive to make real in the present a little of that glorious future held open for us through the past death and resurrection of Jesus. The concept is mind-blowing, and we will almost certainly fail to grasp it in all its fullness in this life, but grappling with it is, in my view, part of what Advent invites us to do.

On waiting

Advent, then, calls us into a state of active waiting: a state that recognizes and embraces the glimmers of God's presence in the world, that recalls and celebrates God's historic yet ever present actions, that speaks the truth about the almost-but-not-quite nature of our Christian living, that yearns for but cannot quite achieve divine perfection. Most of all, Advent summons us to the present moment, to a still yet active, a tranquil yet steadfast commitment to the life we live now. It is this to which Advent beckons us, and without it our Christian journey is impoverished.