

Waiting Well

Johnnette Benkovic

Hello everyone, I'm Johnnette Benkovic, host of EWTN's *Women of Grace*, seen Monday through Friday right there on EWTN Television, as well as host of *Women of Grace Live*, heard Monday through Saturday right there on EWTN Radio. What a pleasure it is for me to have this opportunity to go through Advent with you. A great time of preparation for the joyful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. You know, Advent has a long history in the church, and that history has been one that has changed throughout the course of time. This liturgical season has evolved over the years, and today when we look at Advent, we look at Advent and this holy season as an opportunity for us to wait with expectant faith in the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to make preparation for that coming, and also to enter into a type of sacrificial offering of this time. Certainly that aspect of it is not as great as the Lenten season, but it's interesting to note that from its very beginnings, there has been this element of sacrifice that has been attached to Advent.

And so I would like for you to consider possibly looking at this time as a time of a type of dying to self, so that there can be more of God in us. And when Jesus comes to us again in a brand new way on this great big feast of the church called Christmas, we'll have a dilated heart, a heart that's been opened up and ready to receive Him. I want to share with you a little bit about this element of waiting today, and how it is that we ought to wait for the coming of our Lord. You know, when we think of great events happening in life – a wedding, the birth of a child, when we think about a graduation from high school, or a graduation from college, if we think about, you know, friends that are coming to visit us, or loved ones that are going to be here to spend time with us in our own homes. When we think of those things, we're very aware of that fact that there is this kind of anticipation, there is this kind of excitement that wells up within us, and this is good. But what we want to do is not let the excitement pull us away from the present moment that we're in, and that present moment is this time of waiting.

So what is it about waiting? How can we make waiting a true time of spiritual growth? How can this first week of Advent, as we begin to approach it, how can we use this time well in terms of opening our hearts more to receive Jesus, but also entering into what God wants to do in us in that now moment. I don't think that we think often enough about the grace of the present moment and that now moment. We tend to move too quickly to the future, or to head too far back into the past. The grace of God is always in that present moment.

So I want to talk a little bit with you today about how it is that we make use of this time of waiting, and I grew very much in my own spiritual understanding of this

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

through a writing that was given to us by Henri Nouwen, and it is a talk really that he gave, then obviously afterwards was transcribed, and the transcription of that has been helpful for me. And you can find it. All you have to do is go up to your search engine and put in “A Spirituality of Waiting” and the name “Henri Nouwen,” and you’ll find it there. Print it out, look at it, pray through it, see what God says to you in the midst of it. The first thing that he tells us is that, you know, waiting is a very scriptural thing, and I liked hearing that. I don’t know about you, but I’m always happy when I’m walking in the truth and the light of sacred scripture. And he tells us that, you know, waiting is a very scriptural thing, and he gives us some indications about people who waited.

And he starts and mentions stories in the New Testament. We’ve got Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were waiting, right. They waited a very long time. A very long time to be blessed with the conception of the child that Elizabeth carried, who is Saint John the Baptist. Our Blessed Lady waited, didn’t she? She was waiting, waiting on the Lord all of her life. She was in preparation, preparation. Her parents, they dedicated her, and there was something very special about Mary as a child. And of course we know, we know what that was. She was conceived without the stain of Original Sin, right, the immaculate conception, this close union with God. And that close union with God would eventually come to fulfillment in her through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

And then there were those 9 months of waiting as Baby Jesus gestated in Mary’s womb. And even as we come into the now moment of where we are 4 weeks out from the Christmas season, we think about, you know, how it was for Mary in that last month. For those of you that are women who have had children, you know what that’s like, you know. You’re so excited, you can’t wait for the moment to come, you just want this child to be birthed, everything is ready, and it must have been like that for Our Lady too. She waited. But then her waiting didn’t stop there, did it? Her waiting proceeded forward, and she waited. She waited for 33 years for that culmination of what she knew would come. 30 years with Jesus, 3 years of His Public Ministry. And then the day, the day in which salvation would come to the world through the passion and the death and the resurrection of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Mary waited, but she waited well. We want to wait well too.

And then we have the prophets, Nouwen tells us, Simeon and Anna, and they waited. They waited all of those years in the temple, hoping to behold The Messiah. And the day came, Jesus is born, and Mary and Joseph bring Him to the temple, and Simeon and Anna are there and, you know, there’s that great, great, great revelation, prophetic word that comes through Simeon, that this child is set for the rising and the fall of many, and that through Him righteousness will dawn. “Many will not understand Him,” he tells Our Lady and Saint Joseph. And then looking at our Blessed Lady, he says to her “And His sword will pierce your own heart, so that the secret thoughts of many might be revealed.” In all 3 of

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

those cases, in all 3 of those moments, events, and the people that occupied that moment in time in those moments, we see waiting. But we see a type of waiting that is pregnant with new life, even in the waiting process.

So what is this nature of waiting? Well, Henri Nouwen tells us that waiting is a movement. It's a movement. He says "Waiting, as we see it in the people in the first pages of The Gospel of Luke, is waiting with a sense of promise." Something is being promised. And there's a movement towards the fulfillment of that promise. We've just taken a glance at those 3 moments that he makes reference to, and we see how that is so. So what is the movement? What is the promise that is awaiting you in this Advent season? Where does God want to take you? Where is He leading you specifically? And what new hope-filled promise awaits you in this season? That's the question, right? What is the new thing that God wants to take place in you with this coming of The Savior? There's a promise there. Maybe you don't perceive the promise yet. Maybe you won't perceive it until Christmas morning. Maybe it will be somewhere throughout that Christmas season that it comes into view and perspective for you. But waiting is indeed a movement, it is a process of time that's leading us to a new reality.

And Nouwen says this, you know: "People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They receive something that is a work in them, like a seed that has started to grow." Think of that, you know. We don't see the bloom of the plant when a seed is being gestated in the soil. And we might think that suddenly, oh, there's that shoot that arises above the ground. How did that happen? Well, there's been great activity, there's been a process of preparation for that shoot finally to be visible above the surface of the earth. And so it is the seed of this promise that God has placed in you. This seed of a new entry into the divine life that awaits you on Christmas morning. And there is this time of preparation in the soil of your heart through the seed of the promise that's there. It's a time of great and remarkable activity.

He says this is very important that we understand. "We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun in us." So the good news is that Jesus Christ, who is coming, has come, and is waiting for this new fulfillment of whatever it is that He desires to do in you. So Nouwen says "Waiting is never a movement from nothing to something; it is always a movement from something to something more." I love that. Let me clap. I love that so much. Let me read it again. "It is always a movement from something to something more." Always a movement from something to something more. And then he goes on and says that waiting is also characterized by activity. He says waiting is also active. We spoke about that. He says "Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands." But he says "The great reality is that is not the case." That is not the case. It is an activity already begun in us. A movement from, as we said a moment ago, from something to something more.

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

And so what do we do in that moment, you know, of waiting? So that it doesn't become this sterile time, but rather this time that is marked by the promise of new life, and a new life that has already begun in us? We lean into that time, okay. We lean into that time. We make it, through an effort of cooperation with the will of God, we make use of every opportunity to reflect upon that which is happening. You see, that's what Our Lady did, didn't she? She did it so very well. She reflected upon that which was happening. We see over and over again in Luke's Gospel that he tells us that our Blessed Lady pondered all of these things in her heart, pondered all of these things in her heart. And so we want to ponder in our heart too, don't we? We want to ponder the magnificence of what has come and is coming. Has come and is coming still with a greater fullness, with a greater activity.

And so we wait in patience, but not a patience that is "ugh," but a patience that is rather "yay." A joyful anticipation, a joyful anticipation. And we also wait with hope. And so those are the marks of this time of waiting. Those are the true marks. Knowing that it's a movement, entering into that movement with great activity and anticipation, being patient, but not a sterile patience, but an exhilaration of heart. And waiting with hope, knowing that God is about a great work. He's already begun it, and it's pressing forward to fulfillment. One of my favorite scripture passages comes from Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 11. And God says to the prophet, to us, and to you in this very moment, He says: ***I know well the plans I have in mind for you. Let's say that together. I know well the plans I have in mind for you. Plans for your welfare, not your woe. Plans for your welfare, not your woe. Plans for a future full of hope. Plans for a future full of hope.***

God's got a work begun in you, and He's going to bring it to fulfillment, and we want to cooperate with His grace of the present moment, even as we're moving through this time. So how do we do that? What is the way in which we truly cooperate with His grace? Well I'm going to tell you: We cooperate through prayer. We cooperate through prayer. Through prayer. Through prayer. You know, prayer is the way in which we enter into the heart of this process of waiting. The pondering that Mary did was a meditation of heart and mind. Focused on God, the things of God and what God was doing, and looking and searching for God in the realities that marked her life. And this is a spiritual preparation for the more. It's a spiritual preparation for the more. And that is why prayer is so important.

So let's just talk for a moment about what prayer is. You know, all of the great men and women have so much to say to us about prayer. There's great sayings of the church constantly talking with us about prayer. And we can take to heart much of what they have to say, and Saint Teresa of Avila, she tells us that prayer is simply a conversation with God. Just conversing with Him, talking with Him about it, telling Him "Lord, you know what? Christmas is coming, and I'm so

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

excited about it. But I don't want to miss... I don't want my excitement to carry me away from the grace that You're offering me in this very moment. I want to dig into this grace." And we let Him know it, and we ask Him for His help. Just talk with Him, just as we're talking together today, right. Just talk with Him. Open your heart. "Lord, I really want to see You in this time of preparation, and I really want You to prepare me more and more and more for this great celebration that is going to come."

Saint Francis de Sales says the chief exercise of prayer is to speak to God, and to hear God speak in the bottom of your heart. One of my favorite ones, I love that one. Yep, I say it all the time, you probably heard me say it one time or another. Saint Francis de Sales says that the chief exercise of prayer is to speak to God and to hear God speak in the bottom of your heart. So this requires listening, doesn't it? Listening. So, you know, listening is supposed to be active too. We're engaged in that process. "What are You saying, Lord? Do I hear You? How do I interpret what I hear You saying in light of what I'm experiencing now? Explain to me Lord this movement of grace in my heart." And then we just wait. We go back to the waiting, the act of waiting, which is a movement filled with promise of something more yet to come. And John Newman says that "As speech is the organ of human society," as speech is the organ of human society and the means of human civilization," so is prayer the instrument of divine fellowship and divine training." So is prayer the instrument of divine fellowship and divine training. How exciting is that? That is so very exciting. But the only way to pray is to begin. The only way to pray is to begin. And the only way to pray is to pray well and to pray often, right.

This time of prayer is meant to be this movement forward in the divine light, and a moment forward of the divine light in us. And so I want to encourage you through this first week of Advent, look at your life of prayer. Look at the way in which you are waiting on the Lord, waiting for the Lord. See it as a movement from something to something more. Be helpful, be anticipatory, lean into it, and pray. Until we have an opportunity to talk more about the coming weeks of Advent soon in the future, I'm Johnnette Benkovic, and I truly remain your sister in Christ. God bless you.