Voices of Sisters



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This Advent I've begun to notice a particular sense of expectancy all around me. Perhaps the best way to put it is that I have been encountering pregnant pauses.

Watching as the Advent wreath is blessed and lit at Mass one day, I find my attention drifting to the woman in the second row of chairs gently caressing her growing stomach, the soft stretch of maternity-wear elastic along her sides. A dear friend calls to deliver the news that he and his wife are expecting, a pulsating wave of ecstatic love and nervous joy pouring through the phone. A prayer intention of knowing grief hangs in the quiet of a women's group as a member prays for a friend who has suffered a miscarriage.

Babies. Mothers. Pregnancy. All around me. Expectancy. Emotion. Embodiment.

Standing at the entrance of a friend's baby shower, I pause as I hold a tiny slip of paper. The placard in front of me explains that my friend and her wife have not yet chosen a name for their little one, who will arrive *very* soon. "Suggest a name and tell us the meaning behind it," the prompt suggests. As I fiddle with my pen, I think of all that a name holds. I think of the pregnant pauses, the expectancy, and the virtues I wish for this little one.

I pause to pray for my friends and for the world in which all these pregnant pauses exist, where peace and flourishing coalesce with fear and trembling — a world that God chooses to enter and a world where we are asked to welcome God in.

Without any indication of biological sex, I think of the myriad names I could offer on that tiny slip of paper — big names that take a lifetime to live into and names that carry memories and aspirations. With Advent on my mind, I think of hope, faith, joy and love. What do those things mean to someone waiting to welcome new life into the world? What do they mean to someone whose expectancy is met by the unexpected?

Those are the questions we carry with us as we enter into this Advent season. This time of waiting and reflection prepares us for the promise of Christmas and yet, as I consider the many pregnant pauses I've encountered these days, I wonder if it might

also invite us to reconceive of the way in which we prepare to welcome that new life into our lives and our world.

As I wrote on these pages on the cusp of a Christmas past, our God "is a God of brokenness … born under cover of night, in the lowliest of places, fac[ing] insurmountable odds." This is the God we believe in, the One who became human, who dwelt among us, who became poor to be one with us at our most vulnerable. I think we can forget this or, perhaps, choose to look past the fact that God opted for poverty and invites us, in this season and all seasons, to do the same.

This last point is particularly poignant when considering how easily Advent can become a season focused on inward, personal transformation. In the quiet and the waiting, we pray to become something new. This desire is sincere, no doubt. But whom and for what are we transforming?

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In this season of wonder and candle-lit darkness, we pray that we might be transformed so that God may come to life in us. We ready ourselves to receive the gifts of the Incarnation and the Christmas graces of Emmanuel. This is a beautiful desire and admirable goal but if our Advent actions stop there, we've missed a critical aspect of the season.

The One who is coming, the Christ we ready our hearts to receive in a new way, is Emmanuel — God with *us*. Note the plural there. God with us, not just *me*. This One is not a personal care package or a boost to my spirit alone. The Christ is not incarnated in isolation, confined to the insular creche I prepare in my heart. No, Christ comes into the world and our lives on a much grander scale. This is the One who comes for all people, in all places, especially those places that are broken or abandoned. Our lives and our personal relationship with Jesus may very well be the avenue through which Christ becomes apparent, but the gift that in that advent of Christ offered is for everyone.

Broadening our conception of Christ's coming at Christmas also begs us to reconsider what else about this Advent season we might be holding captive in the confines of our heart. Recalling how Mary pondered all things about Jesus in her heart and Joseph reconsidered the plans he had made in light of God's dream, we're invited with each passing week of Advent to ponder how Christ's coming calls us to reconceive the themes we meditate on in this season: hope, faith, joy and love.

The question becomes not only what do these things mean to me, but what do these concepts mean to *us*?

Reconciling God's preferential love for the poor with our own call to love in the world and encounter God in our neighbor begs us then to reconceive the very themes we meditate upon. In this context, the hope we pray for, which so often is a plea to God for a personal pick-me-up, becomes a prayer that we might find hope in what is hidden *and* offer hope despite what is unknown. With this hope, our meditation on faith becomes a seeking of understanding about why God would dwell among us and what our belief in such incarnation should do in the world. We make room for a faith that is not independent but interdependent with God and with others.

Finding faith and hope straddling the inner and outer parts of ourselves, we are surely swept up in reflecting on joy as the full-bodied rejoicing that God is with us no matter what. More than mere happiness or expectation, this Advent joy reflects the abundance of God, the fruit of pregnant pauses that put flesh on the gift of God’s gratuitous love and rejoice in finding joy and wonder in the existence of others. It is a joy that is not just about our inner peace but peace on earth and goodwill toward all.

This naturally leads us to love. For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, Emmanuel, to be one with us, to dwell in our love and to unite us in loving relationships of mutuality and grace. Increasing our awareness through faith, hope and joy, we prepare room for love to finally rest in the humble dwelling place of our being.

This final movement in the Advent cycle allows us to receive love as God offers it in prayer and in relationship and to offer it, in turn, freely to others and God by opening our hearts in vulnerability and surrender. It is the work of expectancy, emotion and

embodiment immaculately conceived in us by God and reconceived over and over in our lifetime. As we undertake this work in a renewed way this Advent, may our prayer bring us beyond ourselves to reconceive of the gifts God offers us … to consider, in this moment, beyond myself, what God might be offering in the expectant waiting of our collective hearts.