

Beginnings. Advent.

By [Deborah Lewis](#)

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The beginnings of things are sometimes hard to discern as they are happening. Sometimes we experience that lightning bolt of recognition, a sudden, stark contrast between then and now, seeing in a stranger's face the one we are beginning to love in that same moment. More often, we realize in the midst of things that they've already begun, something new seeping into the familiar terrain, changing the texture like steady gentle rain saturating dry ground. What was hard and dusty becomes damp and spongy, the moment of change imperceptible.

Advent doesn't officially begin until this Sunday, but if you've been paying attention to the [lectionary](#) you'll have noticed the end of one Christian liturgical year and the beginning of the next seep into each other over several weeks. There are anxious and bored people who concoct "wars" regarding Christmas: that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the way it can be hard to tell where we are in the circle of the year, how professing Christ as Lord of all sounds a lot like talking about his second coming. I mean to point out how, when we are busy with lines in the sand between Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas retail displays, the bareness of winter arrives in the midst of falling colored leaves and pumpkins, gratitude arises weeks before and after Thanksgiving Thursday, and the practice of waiting opens into the necessary miracle of an unclenched heart, making enough breathing space for today.

It's the space that interests me most. No room in the inn. Census cities full of crowds. Sidewalks bustling, full social calendars, and long lines at the register, where everyone peers down into cell phones while they wait. Even the space in Mary's day to allow time in solitude for reading before Gabriel shows up. More obviously, the literal space she makes in her own body to carry another body for most of a year. I imagine that was good practice for making space as her son grew up into exactly who she'd been told he would be, and more than she could have conceived.

It's the space I need most right now, and pray for. The downside of being an accomplished scheduler is that any empty space looks like it needs an agenda. I am ready for the unclenching of heart and time, the strangeness of open anticipation, the space for something wholly new and holy to be born. I am ready to lay off organizing my days and to experience making room in myself to receive the gift God wants to give. I'm OK with being pregnant awhile, giving attention to simple, daily patterns of eating and sleeping, while God works out the rest.

What if this is the way Advent comes? What if this slow and simple longing for what's missing in my life is the seed God's ready to water and tend, if I leave enough room and let myself be tended? This is not a plea against the marketplace or holiday gatherings or Christmas cantatas. It's a simple prayer, reminding myself that I'm not God, that I need God, and that I'm ready (again) to let God be God.

The carpenter from Nazareth knew long workdays, sweaty lunch breaks, lazy coworkers, small paychecks ... delicious dinners, restful sleep, the warmth of family, healing touch. The incarnation means there is nothing secular anymore. No place to hide from God. No part of life that God-in-Christ is not intimately familiar with in human form. We miss this all the time, like most people missed the lowly birth of God into this world. It would have been easy to go on about your census business in Bethlehem the next day, unchanged. Even for the wise travelers who recognized *something* had happened, did they know what to do with it those 30 years the baby took to grow up and take on his ministry? It's too easy to hold our breath through "the weeks leading up to," through shopping lists, long workdays, countdown to vacation, advance baking—as if all of that doesn't hold the potential for incarnated holiness, too.

Seeping-in texts, festive foods, special soundtracks, candlelight at church and at home. Space looks like these, too, like ordinary spaces and paces transformed, like flickering lights in the yard. Holiness has not escaped the everyday. It's shining right through the middle of it. If we remind ourselves earlier than normal and linger longer in the music and lights, so be it.

When holiness is harder to see—as it was last week and in too many angry, violent weeks—or, when we forget how beautiful and ordinary and accessible it is, it helps to make a point of seeing and celebrating it. Unmistakably. Longer and larger than a season itself can hold. Until, without quite knowing when the change occurred, our dry-cracked hearts are drenched with new rain.

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