

Keeping silence

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

I love Thanksgiving. It's the one holiday the retail economy has not been able to capture. There is something authentic about a holiday that doesn't require us to buy anything, but just invites us to gather our loved ones around a dinner table and be grateful. I am thankful for the annual opportunity to take stock and give expression to my gratitude. One of the things for which I am most grateful is this journal, for the team that creates it throughout the year, and for their commitment to making it a lively, faithful, provocative, stimulating magazine.

And I love Thanksgiving because it is prelude to my favorite season. In the church I serve the opening hymn on the First Sunday of Advent is always "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." The hymn has a heavy, ponderous, sonorous melody that goes all the way back to the chants of the fourth century. It's the kind of hymn that irritates those who wonder why we can't sing Christmas carols all month long.

"Joy to the World" has already been blasting in the department stores on Michigan Avenue for weeks. The street musician trombonist on the avenue has a repertoire of two which he plays all day long, every day: "Deck the Halls" and "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" isn't very perky or lively; you probably can't do a bouncy praise arrangement. But the hymn reminds us of something important: that the story we are about to retell and the event we are about to celebrate again did not happen last week. The hymn reminds us that it is a story of waiting, waiting thousands of years before the event, and waiting now for its completion, its consummation.

The late Henri Nouwen used to observe that waiting, particularly in the culture of North America, is not a very popular activity. Most people consider waiting a waste of time, an "awful desert between where they are and where they want to be." But waiting is a major scriptural theme, and the lovely season of Advent, with its rich hymnody in a minor key, its candlelight in the darkening shadows of December, its color purple, is a time for us to slow down, to be quiet and to wait.

Advent means the world is pregnant with the seeds of God's love, God's justice, God's peace, and God's ultimate victory over all that denies or destroys life. "Let all mortal flesh keep silence / And with fear and trembling stand; / Ponder nothing earthly minded, / For with blessing in his hand / Christ our God to earth descendeth / Our full homage to demand."