

TRUST THE LIGHT

by Darlene Carlson

Waiting is rarely easy for any of us. Perhaps you experience times of waiting patiently and other times not so much. In our world of instant gratification, waiting has become less and less familiar. For me, waiting can feel like time standing still. Stuck at a red light. Standing in line at a store. Staring at a computer screen as it starts up. Sometimes waiting feels stressful as if time is being wasted. Take a deep breath, pause, and notice how you wait. How does it feel for you?

We see how waiting is built into our natural worlds: the tide comes in and goes out, the sun rises and sets, leaves turn color, fall, and emerge as buds again after a barren winter. Consider the cocoon, preparing the caterpillar for its first flight as a butterfly. This wait is easier because there is an expectation, a relatively familiar outcome. We trust it because we have seen it before.

This Advent season requires us to wait without our usual maps. The outcomes are unknown. We are living through an incredibly difficult time we have never before experienced. We are not gathering as we used to, our traditional ways compromised with risk. We are feeling so many things: surprise, fear, disappointment, loneliness, uncertainty, maybe even relief that things will be slower or quieter this year. Wherever you find yourself, we all know it to be like no other time given Covid numbers rising, racial injustice, and economic uncertainty. These and other trials weigh heavily on our hearts. The path is not clear, and many feel lost and alone.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways trust him,
and he will make your paths straight.*
Proverbs 3:5-6

This year more than ever, we are called to trust God during the wait. Trust the compass is guiding us. Trust the wait is not wasted time. The Holy Spirit is working as we wait, creating opportunities for us to look more deeply at what is important. Trusting in the slow and sometimes mysterious work of God requires work and can feel overwhelming. One practice I find helpful this time of year is the ritual of lighting the Advent wreath, one candle for each of the four weeks leading to Christmas. The first candle is purple and represents a focus on hope for the week. Then there is a second purple candle for peace in week two. The third candle is a pink candle for joy in week three and a final purple candle for love in the fourth and last week. If an Advent wreath is not part of your tradition, you can use any candles as a ritual to open your heart to these gifts.

Over the years, I imagined hope, peace, joy, and love, like gifts under the Christmas tree waiting to be opened. I look at it differently now; we don't have to wait. These gifts are freely given to all of us, lighting the path, living now. They are present in the wait!



This Advent, I invite you to ignite the flame within you as you light your candles with renewed meaning:

Ignite Hope. This is not the hope for a perfect holiday. It is a hope grounded in trust, the theological hope that reaches for something we already, if imperfectly, possess: the love of God. This hope is so infinite we cannot be alone in it. We hope with each other and foster it with gratitude for life on this journey, a journey not just to Christmas but to everlasting life with God; a journey that began before we were born; the journey home. Open your heart to the gift of hope.

Ignite Peace. Like the tides, like the seasons, worldly peace comes and goes, yet there is a deeper peace within you. To connect with this peace, I invite you to practice a ritual we are sharing during our Advent retreat. Connect with something that has always brought you peace, a “piece of peace,” an object or picture or a thought. Place it in your hands. Take time to cherish this piece of peace, breathing in the goodness and exhaling it into your home. Shower it with gratitude, creating a cycle of giving and receiving this peace you trust. Open your heart to the gift of peace.

Ignite Joy. Joy does not deny the darkness we know is there. Rather, joy looks for the light: the helpers; a friend who brings comfort; the sun shining through the clouds; seeing a loved one on Zoom or FaceTime; the purr of your cat or wag of your dog’s tail; smelling the air after a fresh rain; the quiet beauty of fresh fallen snow coating a cold landscape; the sound of waves crashing on the beach; the birdsong; a smile; waking to a prayer on Christmas morning. Choose simple joy this Advent, one filled with promise and assurance within your being. Open your heart to the gift of joy.

Ignite Love. God waits for us tirelessly and without reservation, present even when we are not aware. When I feel overwhelmed with waiting and questions of what is to come, I pray for my compass to point to the North Star, not the anchor in our sky, but the anchor in our souls, the Holy One who is always there. Lighting the candle of love comes in our final week of Advent as we welcome the new season of Christmas, a season of the purest sign of love God gave to us, His Son, our greatest gift. Christ’s love for you is in the wait, guiding you, and never giving up. Open your heart to the gift of love.

These gifts are yours now and forevermore: hope, peace, joy, and love, all wrapped in trust and lighting the way.

