

Heartbeats

The Company of St. Angela in the 21st Century

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Pilgrimage through Transition: An Advent of Waiting versus Preparing



As I think about both Angela as pilgrim and Advent as a time of preparation, I feel drawn to reflect on my own experience of inner pilgrimage, which has been a significant part of my life this past year. I never expected that God would call me to the vocations of wife and step-mother, but this is exactly what I was called to in 2018.

Knowing that these are large life transitions, I endeavored to prepare well. I tediously planned details for a wedding and to move in with my new family; I read countless books on step-mothering and healthy relationships; I left my cozy graduate assistantship as a full-time doctoral student for a job as a high-school teacher; and I consulted professionals, meeting weekly for individual therapy, couple's counseling, and family counseling to prepare us all for blended family life. Once married, I dedicated my time to preparing to be a good high school teacher. I read books on pedagogy, classroom management, and teaching strategies; I met with several high school teachers and secondary education specialists to glean as much insight as possible; and I carefully laid out a family calendar for the coming year. Ostensibly, I was quite well prepared.

It wasn't until I started new teacher orientation, two months into my marriage, that I realized something was seriously wrong, something for which I had not prepared. I started experiencing levels of anxiety that made it difficult to function normally. Despite trying to respond quickly with proper medical care, my health deteriorated suddenly and rapidly. By the end of the first day of teaching, I was in the emergency room, completely unable to function. I spent the next six weeks in an intensive outpatient treatment program for major depression and anxiety disorders. Everything came to a halt. None of my tedious, detailed, and carefully laid preparations mattered anymore. I had somehow gotten lost on the journey through transition, or so I thought.

It was in the time that I was recovering from depression that my real journey began. Angela was very present to me during that time, as she promised her daughters she would be, lending aid to our prayers. One day, a couple weeks into recovery, I was walking through a local park when Angela's presence was particularly palpable. I stopped and sat down. I waited. I listened. Eventually, I felt compelled to place my hands over my heart and whisper "I love you, I am listening." God responded from within me and my inner pilgrimage began, without any preparation, with just a gentle invitation from the spirit of Angela.

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Many things changed since as a result of my inner pilgrimage. Most importantly, how I understand my journey through transition has shifted. I came to realize that the journey to which I was being called was an interior one, a spiritual pilgrimage. In fact, it was my exclusive focus on the outer transitions (moving, scheduling, etc.) that kept me from seeing that God wasn't just calling me to the new and unexpected vocations of wife and step-mother. Rather, God was calling me to a deep inner transformation, using the vocations of wife and step-mother to communicate this deeper call. I was just so bad at listening that God had to resort to more obvious means.

Advent is an easy time to get lost in outer preparations. Whether it is preparing for Christmas parties, liturgies, gifts, etc., we spend much time in external planning. Even in our spiritual life we can overly rely on prepared structures of prayer. However, it is important to remember that Advent is also about waiting. Still, quiet, preparation-free waiting. We can't know what God is preparing for us and us for if we are too busy focusing on what we think needs to be prepared. As we try to prevent ourselves from getting lost in the outer preparations of Christmas, we could ask, "What does Jesus want for me for Christmas?" instead of asking "What do I want for Christmas?" or "What does my family want from me for Christmas?" This leaves room for us to receive things that we never could prepare for, but which God has been waiting to give us.

I will close by invoking a part of Psalm 25 as a prayer for this Advent season: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul, my God in you I trust...Make known to me your ways, Lord; teach me your paths. Guide me by your fidelity and teach me, for you are God my savior, for you I wait all the day long."

Meghan Toomey
Chicago, Illinois



Lead me by your truth and teach me,
for you are the God who saves me.
All day long I put my hope in you.

PSALM 25:5
