The Martin-Browne family Advent calendar is not nearly as nice as the Bonner family Advent calendar. For one thing, it’s older and it’s showing its age. For another, it had a rough beginning. It was left over after a Christmas craft sale and its creator didn’t want to pack it back up and take it home. “Here,” she said putting it in her pastor’s -- my husband’s -- hands. “Merry Christmas!” This was at the Reed City United Methodist Church. Lexie, our younger daughter, was born there and she’s 18 now. So our Advent calendar is about 16 or 17 years old.

It is not the most elegant of Advent calendars. The little felt pieces keep losing their Velcro backings; the ink from the felt tip marker that was used to write the dates is fading, and the interfacing used to create the pockets is sagging in spots. It has 24 pockets, but 25 pieces to be put on the tree. So two of them get jammed into one pocket…which results in missing sequins and bent corners.

Not to mention the fact that this really isn’t an Advent calendar, it’s a December calendar. This year, for the first time in a long time, Advent actually begins after December 1. So if you have a calendar like this one or like the Bonners, with 24
little doors or decorations for the first 24 days of December, you had to open a little door or put a little felt piece on the tree a day early.

Once Lexie was old enough to know that she had to stand up for herself in the face of her older sister’s seniority…in other words, once she turned 2… this Advent calendar became the source of a heated battle between the two Martin-Browne girls. Who was going to have the honor of putting the last piece, the little star, on the top of the tree on Christmas morning? You would have thought this single act determined the success or failure of their entire lives, so fierce was their wrangling.

All by themselves, though, they reached détente. They would alternate years. One year Katie would start with Day 1, and therefore end up with Day 25; the next year it would be Lexie’s turn. I was convinced that they would never remember from year to year who went first, but I was wrong. This was VERY IMPORTANT, and they both remembered and always agreed as to whose turn it was this year.

It was a miracle.

Advent calendars are meant to help us wait for the miracle of Christmas morning. But actually I think they do the opposite. It did in our family, anyway, whipping up the children’s energy and anticipation for the big day – Christmas, otherwise
known as the Day of Getting What You Wished For. Or, as so often happens, the Day of NOT Getting What You Wished For.

Advent is supposed to be a time of conscious waiting, of deepened spiritual practice, of alertness as to God’s movement in our lives. But when the Advent calendar becomes the countdown calendar, you have to wonder: What is it that we’re expecting? What are we really waiting for?

The Christmas that many of us wait for has only the slimmest of connections to the biblical stories of Jesus’ birth. We mix together a little Gospel of Luke and a little Gospel of Matthew, and then we add a big dollop of 18th century Victorian practices and a double shot of Santa theology. Y’know: *he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness’ sake.*

For those who know their Bible a little better, the Christmas miracle we’re expecting might be the star, or the angels talking to the shepherds, or the animals talking to each other in the stable, or the little drummer boy –wait! That’s not in the Bible.

Pastor Mike Slaughter points out that even the Christmas hymns in our hymnals give us a cleaned-up version of what must have been a traumatic event: “The
cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes/ but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

When has there ever been a newborn baby who didn’t cry?

This doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in the miracle of Christmas, or miracles in general. I do! And I believe that miracles are not the same thing as magic.

Mike Slaughter says that the difference between miracles and magic is that magic appears out of thin air, but miracles require our participation. Miracles don’t just happen, he says, they are born through the pains of labor. In order for God to work a miracle through you, you have to be willing to go through the labor.

I understand what Rev. Slaughter is saying, but I have to tell you: it’s not the labor that’s the problem for me. It’s not the hard work. I’m pretty much up for hard work. Give me a shovel and I’ll dig; give me an oar and I’ll paddle. The hard part for me is the waiting. Miracles might be born through labor, but they also require waiting. Just like the birth of a baby. You have to be willing to wait.

The great Dutch-born theologian and mystic Henri Nouwen said that Americans were not very good at waiting. Most of us consider waiting to be a huge waste of time. We celebrate action; we look for results; and we don’t want to wait for them. Relentless advertising convinces us that we deserve to have whatever we want, and
we deserve to have it now. As a result, Nouwen said, waiting is the awful desert between where we are and where we want to be.

But waiting is a biblical theme. You’ll find it all over the Bible, and almost always in situations that are bleak: Abraham and Sarah wait to become parents, the escaped Hebrews wait to reach the Promised Land; the prophets wait for a righteous King to rule Israel. The Israelites exiled from Jerusalem in the 6th century BC wait while they are in captivity, prisoners in a foreign land. Defeated, expelled from their homes and their beloved city, their beautiful temple in ruins, Isaiah describes them as “sitting in deep darkness.” They are the people we sang about in our opening hymn, “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here.”

This kind of waiting means giving up some control, even some comfort. You have no idea what’s ahead because the possibilities aren’t obvious. Maybe this is the labor being asked of us – we have to be willing to wait for God to work a miracle through us without knowing exactly what it is God is going to do. We don’t get the agenda in advance, we don’t get the chance to approve or disapprove or tweak until it suits us.

The Jewish people of Roman-occupied Palestine had been waiting for a long time. They thought they knew what they were waiting for – a Messiah. But they hadn’t
seen the Christmas pageant so they didn’t know they were looking for a Messiah that looked just like them.

Neither he nor his message was what they were expecting. He walked into the synagogue that morning, opened the scroll and read the scripture. Then he just sat down and said “Today this scripture is fulfilled….” That was it. It was not the miracle they expected.

Who would expect, after all, that God’s miracle in that time and place would turn out to be someone who persistently befriended the poor, the outcasts, even those who seemed to be his enemies? Who would guess that a Messiah would listen and teach, eat and heal, and keep on doing that until he himself fell victim to the rich and powerful?

Even then he didn’t act as one would think: he responded not with vengeance or threats. He went calmly toward death, stopping to heal a slave’s ear, to comfort the women who wept for him, to encourage his fellow condemned and ask forgiveness for his murderers.

Now it makes sense, now we can see how this man was the Good News, bringing sight for the blind and release to the captives, and life out of death. But then even
his disciples were expecting magic, so much so that it took them awhile to see the miracle.

So what kind of miracle is God waiting to work through you – through *us* – this Advent? What new thing might be waiting for your willingness, your participation?

It might be what we give. Here’s a miracle for you: in the last 3 or 4 weeks that we have asked for contributions to Hurricane Relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, you have given $5,215. Sounds like a miracle to me!

Maybe the miracle God is working through you is the gift of time and song. Unless you’ve seen it yourself, you might not believe how much joy one group of not-so-professional carolers can give to someone who can’t get out much or who’s had a rough year. Is God hoping to work that kind of miracle through you? We go caroling next Sunday at 1:30 PM.

It could be that the miracle you’re not expecting has to do with just you, your life, what you’re going through in this season. Would you be willing to let God change you by setting aside some portion of your time to be with God in prayer every day? You could use the devotional book that accompanies our sermon series. (It’s
available from the table in the Gathering Space. If we run out, you can order a copy yourself. The website address is listed there at the table.)

In all these ways, through giving, through sharing, through praying, God can and will work miracles through you. It will probably happen in some way that you would never expect. And it will probably require some waiting and some willingness on your part. You might have to be willing to give something up – some money, maybe, or some control, or authority, or pride.

On the night Jesus gave himself up for us, no one was expecting a miracle. On the day when it appeared that the human need for control and power had won, no one imagined that God had something new to say. In the hours during which the man who brought good news to the poor and release to the captives was himself captive on the cross, the last thing anyone was waiting for was to live in his presence again.

But here we are, at his table, eating and sharing and living in his very real presence, again. Of all the miracles we never expected, this might be the most amazing -- finding God Incarnate here on this ordinary day, in this ordinary church, with all these ordinary people. And the part you have to give, the labor you have to be willing to offer, the sacrifice you have to make in order to be part of this miracle is simply to come to this table with open hands and open heart.
References


