



SYLVIE VANHOOZER

The ART
of
LIVING
in
ADVENT

28 DAYS
of JOYFUL
WAITING



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Advent Week One

*The ART of JOYFUL
WAITING in PLACE*

Day One

GOD SETS *the* STAGE



*O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth for
me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*

MICAH 5:2

During the four hundred years of what we could call Israel's long Advent season, the people of God waited for their Messiah, Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), to come to a very specific location: "O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." To Bethlehem we must then look!



Seasonal local vegetation

This is why my ancestors called their nativity scenes *lou Belèn*: “the Bethlehem,” in Provençal. But this “Bethlehem” looks strangely like home, not just because of its name but, even more conspicuously, because of its architecture and landscaping. With its red-tiled roofs (*les tuiles romaines*) and plants such as thyme, juniper, and rosemary, it practically shouts out its Provençal roots. Another hint as to its southern French location are the clothes worn by the little clay figures who fill out the scene. These santons (“little saints”) bear a striking resemblance to the people who lived in the scattered villages of Provence in the early nineteenth century, when these unique manger scenes first appeared.

In a garden far, far away from the Mediterranean—my present home a few miles from Lake Michigan—I look for seasonal vegetation, in *my* local place, with which to decorate my own crèche. This is what I would be doing to welcome him if I still lived in Provence. However, as one of the stepping stones in my garden proclaims: *I am here*. And *here* is the place where I am weaving my new homeland, with its distinct plants, onto an old tradition, itself woven onto the greater story of what first happened in Bethlehem, when the long-awaited Messiah came to us, in the flesh (John 1:14). From wild vine leaves slowly changing into dark umber tones, to delicate hydrangea flowers, I seek treasures. It is but one of the many gardens God has created—not the first (Eden), nor the one I knew as a child in Provence. Rather, it belongs to the place where I now am. *Here* is where I am learning the art of watchful joyful waiting. *Here*, too, is where the Lord continues to come.

Pray

Lord, thank you for all the gardens I have known, and for the garden you give me now, one more place where I can welcome you. Thank you for your Son, who came as second Adam to a particular place on earth, Bethlehem, to dwell among us in a new way and show us the way back to you. Help me to watch patiently and faithfully for your presence and activity wherever I am. Even in this pre-winter season, when nature seems to be dying, help me see glimpses of life in your garden!

Day Two

The CRÈCHE'S TERROIR



*“For unto you is born this day in the city of David
a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

LUKE 2:11

In the beginning of Advent the sons and daughters of Adam in Provence busy themselves around the cradle, not of civilization, West of Eden, but of the child Christ. In the land of my ancestors, the tradition is to relocate the hallowed manger, the place where the Son of God came to earth, in their own land, their *terroir*. The word *terroir* is more poetic than *territory*; it refers to the peculiar soil of a particular locale that grows a specific vegetation and, eventually, a distinctive people. *Le terroir, c'est nous* (“The land, it’s us”). Their place is tied up with their identity and sense of belonging.

The tradition of rooting Jesus’ manger in Provence is legendary but nevertheless symbolic, an expression of faith: Jesus has come to our land, along the shores of a vast blue sea and the banks of the Rhône river. Jesus has come *to us*. The crèche grafts their story onto Jesus’ story, not by replicating a first-century Palestinian stable in

present-day Provence, but by transforming the first-century Palestinian manger into a nineteenth-century Provençal crèche. Why the anachronism? Because “the Word became flesh and *dwelt among us*”—or, as *The Message* puts it, “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, emphasis mine). What the crèche lacks in historical accuracy it more than makes up for in theological correctness: “For to *us* a child is born, to *us* a son is given” (Isaiah 9:6, emphasis mine)!

To the crèche makers of Provence, this anachronism relocates the greater story, and the baby Jesus himself, into the midst of their own land and traditions. From intimate living rooms to marketplaces, museums, and city halls, the scene represents in miniature the beginning of the story of Jesus—here. Whether or not they believe in him as Lord and Savior, he is part of their land, and their land is part of his story! Surely this is something to ponder in one’s heart, as I did when I was very young, even though I, like other children from a nonreligious home, never quite knew what happened to the baby Jesus when he grew up!

This tradition of situating the manger, baby and all, in our own environs has become ingrained throughout southern France. If it is true that “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ . . . does not cry, ‘Mine!’” then surely he can visit his followers, wherever they happen to be—Provence, like my ancestors, just as well as Nigeria, Haiti, Indonesia, or any other locale. Jesus can come to any people group and culture, as the pouring out of his Spirit at Pentecost shows us (Acts 2:6-17). The historical facts of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem are important: they fulfill prophecy and display the faithfulness of God. But Advent is not

just about reenacting the past. Nor is it only about anticipating the future—the *second* coming of our King. No, for everyday disciples the world over, Advent is also very much about the present. It is about learning how to watchfully wait for Jesus in my place. Should we not welcome and invite him in?

Pause

Consider situating the manger in your place this Advent. Think of it not as a scene to look at but one to step into, an opportunity to rethink the meaning of Christmas, to remember that God puts us in places into which we can invite him to come. Thank God for your place and for his presence there!

Consider, too, that as we are watching and waiting for Jesus, he is watching and waiting for us, not in church on Sundays only but in all our times and place. Jesus is even now moving “into the neighborhood.”

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