Columns
Ministry



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Expectant waiting. These two words often describe Advent. This is our season of waiting and preparing for the birth of Christ. Our Advent calendars patiently count

down the days, waiting for the big moment. We light purple and pink candles to mark each week and reflect on the peace, hope, love and joy of the season.

But what if the invitation of this season is to do more than wait? What if these four weeks leading up to Christmas are a call to action? Our Advent journey toward Christmas is a time when we come face to face with the Divine invitation of Jesus' incarnation. Every year, the celebration of Christ's birth calls us to actively discern how we can respond to the outpouring of God's love.

In the two Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, we see people launched into action. Mary and Joseph must travel for the census, the shepherds went with haste, and the magi followed a star across the desert. Everyone is on the move — wondering, hoping and seeking in response to a divine invitation. But what is God inviting them to? Leading up to the first Christmas, everyone who encountered God's message had more questions than answers. Those questions needed to be pondered and discerned.

Discernment is not simply guessing what God secretly wants us to do. It is the prayerful conversation that allows us to co-create with God as our lives unfold before us. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds had personal messages from God with concrete invitations and instructions: "Take Mary as your wife." "Name him Jesus." "You will find a child."

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Even so, they all asked follow-up questions. Mary wondered how she could possibly be with child before saying "yes" to God's wonderful invitation. Joseph was asked in a dream to face his fears before he could accept his role as Jesus' foster father. The shepherds didn't know what to make of the angelic choir rejoicing at Jesus' birth; they had to go and see for themselves in order to understand God's gift. Discernment, even when God's call gives us a clear idea of what we are looking for, requires us to actively explore and search for meaning.

Unfortunately, discernment isn't so straightforward for most of us. For many, it may be easier to relate to the experience of the magi who did not receive such clear directions. It is probable that the magi were astrologers just doing their jobs, watching the skies for signs and messages, when they were surprised by a new star. A celestial message arriving without instructions.

According to their tradition, a new star would signify the birth of a new ruler, but what would the birth of a foreign ruler mean for the magi? The star was an unlooked-for invitation calling the magi into the unknown. Just as Mary, Joseph and the shepherds acted in response to God's unexpected call, the magi set out on their unique journey to discover what God's invitation might mean for them.

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Discernment is important when we face a decision, but it is equally important when God surprises us with new possibilities. And God will surprise us — often! When we aren't looking for new opportunities, when we aren't at a crossroads, God will still whisper to "the ear of our heart," asking us to journey with God — wherever that may lead. There is no right or wrong answer here, it is purely the choice to let God into our lives as a partner and guide.

However, this is not a choice made once and for all. The choice to welcome God into our lives, into all that we are, is a daily active opening that requires us to keep putting one foot in front of the other, moving with God even when we do not know where we are going.

That is the action we are called to in the spirit of Advent: not just expectant waiting on God to act, but the intentional desire to let God be with us in all the ups and downs of life. The season of Advent is an opportunity to realize that God doesn't want to be part of our plans only when we face a difficult choice or when we need a miracle. God wants to be with us in everything, always.

The culmination of Advent celebrates the day God so loved the world that God came to dwell with us. We prepare to celebrate the moment when we will usher in the Christmas season at midnight, when we will welcome God With Us, by actively opening ourselves to God who is always with us. We are not just waiting; we are practicing with every choice and every step along the way. It is easy to forget God's invitation is to actively participate with God while we journey through the sacred night of Advent toward Christmas morning. Practice searching your personal night sky for a new star. Stay active. Stay awake. And stay open.

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.