

The anticipation of Advent

As a child, I loved Christmas Eve almost as much as Christmas morning. The tree was decorated, the Christmas music was playing, and my father was almost always baking last-minute batches of cookies for friends. You could hear the sounds of cutting and taping behind closed doors – and then the squeals when someone accidentally – or on purpose – pushed one open.

Then came the incredibly important task of preparing Santa's snack. My youngest brother and sister spent hours arranging the treats for him, considering the best arrangement of the plate and napkin and how many carrots the reindeer needed. My father usually argued that all Santa really wanted was a cold beer.

Over the years, the traditions changed. But, even as my siblings and I have welcomed the next generation of children into our lives, that excited anticipation of Christmas Eve has stayed the same.

It's still a day for tracking down a few last-minute items and wrapping the gifts that I hope I have been successfully hiding. My children hang their stockings with care and leave a snack for that jolly old elf and his reindeer.

And always, year after year, I realize there's something I forgot – a gift I meant to order weeks earlier, a dish I had planned to prepare for Christmas dinner, or people I forgot to include on our Christmas card list. Somehow Christmas Eve arrives and, even though I've had 365 days to prepare since the last time, I'm never fully ready.

That's how Advent is for me. When we pull out the Advent wreath after Thanksgiving, the season stretches out ahead of us, full of possibility and weeks and weeks of time. I always have these wonderful expectations of how we'll participate in family prayer and read Bible stories and talk about the Christmas story over and over.

Then night after night fills with dinner and homework. Someone gets sick. And, though we never forget that it's Advent, we have busy evenings when the wreath doesn't get lit.

Then, all of a sudden, it's Christmas Eve, and we're days behind in our Advent prayer book. I find I'm unprepared and unable to be all I was supposed to be for Christmas. Despite my best efforts, life has gotten in the way. I wonder whether I am truly ready to welcome the newborn Son of God into my life.

It's at those moments when I try to hold onto the image of Mary and Joseph, traveling a slow, difficult journey to Bethlehem. They don't even have a place to stay. They find themselves sleeping in a dusty stable full of animals. They are deeply holy people, but even they don't seem to be ready for Jesus to arrive.

Still, God has his timing. Jesus is born. God becomes man. Angels fill the sky. And Mary and Joseph are everything they need to be for this tiny Christ Child. Even the shepherds, who have had no notice and no time to prepare, recognize Jesus and encounter him just as they are. And the world rejoices.

This Advent I'll try again. I will set what are likely unreasonable expectations for my personal faith journey. But when I fall short, I'll try to remember that Jesus does not just come to us when we are perfect. He comes to us as we are, even if we are shepherds watching our sheep in the fields.

"That is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken."

An Advent season doesn't need to be perfectly wrapped and tied with a gorgeous bow, shimmering in the light of a Christmas tree that's fit for a magazine cover. Even with our failings, Jesus can come to us in a special way. And I pray he does just that for each of us this Christmas.