

Disengage the autopilot

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



I was driving to work one day thinking about my schedule—the meetings I needed to attend, reports I needed to finish, preparations still to be completed for upcoming travel, email I needed to answer, phone calls I absolutely had to make, and compiling a grocery

list in my head so I would pick up what I needed for supper on the way home from work. All of a sudden I found myself pulling into the parking garage at the Lutheran Center. I had driven the 9 miles to work and had no idea how I got there. I didn't remember the traffic lights, the turns, the scenery—nothing. I had been so absorbed in what was coming up that I was completely oblivious to the present.

I think this experience is not unique to me. We set part of our lives on autopilot and set the planning, list-making, what-if scheduling part on overdrive. Our culture actually encourages this. When do back-to-school sales start showing up in stores? When do Christmas decorations appear in town squares and at the mall? We have already seen evidence that the next presidential campaign is underway. It can be light all the time now. Burgers or tacos at your favorite fast-food emporium are available around the clock. It's disorienting. We're thrown out of rhythm.

I remember how confused I became when I first started my call as synod bishop. Gone were the familiar patterns of parish ministry: Monday I got organized for the week, Wednesday night was catechism, Thursday night was choir practice, and everything pointed toward Sunday. The year made sense: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost. As synod bishop and in my current call, we plan so far in advance that I'm not always sure what time of year it is—and there are so many time zones!

Now, planning is a good and necessary thing. One ought to be aware of what is coming up,

what needs to be done, and where one needs to be. But I found that I was so driven by all of the contingencies and possibilities that I was everywhere all of the time and therefore not anywhere at all.

I asked my spiritual director about this and she recommended that I meditate on these four words: "Just this. Just now." It's a simple discipline, but not an easy one. It can alleviate all that anticipatory stress, but only if we are willing to quiet down. Near the end of Psalm 46, after descriptions of tumult and uproar, the Lord says, "Be still and know that I am God."


Here we are in Advent. This season doesn't exist in secular culture, where everything is barreling toward Christmas. No time to wait, no time to notice, no time to be present. Not this. Not now. All of a sudden we will find ourselves on the day after Christmas not knowing how we got there.

Advent is a holy season, a season that bids us to be present, to be still. So much is evoked in this season—hope, longing, the bittersweet awareness that the world is beautiful and broken. Consider all of these things. Sit with them. Pray with them. Be aware of this time of great promise that comes, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, when night is longest. "In a momentary meeting of eternity and time, Mary learned she would carry both the mortal and divine" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 258). Disengage the autopilot. Notice.

The rest of that Advent hymn invites us to be present:

We are called to ponder mystery and await the coming Christ, to embody God's compassion for each fragile human life.

God is with us in our longing to bring healing to the earth, while we watch with joy and wonder for the promised Savior's birth.

Just this. Just now. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.

This article originally appeared in the December 2017 issue of *Living Lutheran*. Reprinted with permission