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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Advent*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

I do think of Advent as a season of preparation, but it has always felt less penitential than Lent does to me. It feels more like a time of expectation – as Paul says at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, “Our Lord come!”

I love Advent. The symbols of darkness and light resonate more powerfully with me, as our days grow shorter. The making of evergreen wreaths and the ceremonial lighting of the candles sanctify the time. Hearing the ancient “O” Antiphons in our Lessons and Carols services remind me of the beautiful liturgical traditions that have sustained our waiting for so long.

Yet, with all of these spiritual disciplines focused on the present, and the steady flow of scriptural admonitions to stay awake and be alert, it’s still hard not to rush through Advent. There is just so much to do to before the end of the year. And, I find myself quickening my pace and packing my calendar without realizing that my anticipation of what’s coming next has gotten the best of me.

I was thinking about all of this recently when I came across a story that one of my favorite writers, Annie Dillard, tells about the birth of a butterfly.

Dillard was watching a cocoon one day, waiting for a butterfly to emerge. Her excitement turned into impatience, so she lit a candle and carefully held it under the cocoon. And, she got what she wanted.

The butterfly came out more quickly than it would have otherwise. But, what appeared to be the acceleration of a process turned out to be a short-circuiting of it. The butterfly’s wings had not had the time that they needed to develop, and they were not strong enough to fly.

The story reflected my mood more than I had realized.

I have been feeling a little lonely lately. As Christmas plans develop, I am becoming increasingly aware of family and friends that I won’t be able to see this year – and, of course, of people I have loved who aren’t with us anymore. Maybe you are feeling a little like this too.

I think the calling of Advent might be to sit with these feelings, avoiding the urge to rush past them.

I think that it might be the longings we feel for intimacy and relationship that allow us to develop the wings that we need to fly.

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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