



SYLVIE VANHOOZER

FOREWORD BY
KEVIN J. VANHOOZER



The ART
of
LIVING
in
SEASON



A YEAR *of*
REFLECTIONS

for
EVERYDAY
SAINTS



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Art of Living in Season* by Sylvie Vanhoozer.

Copyright © 2024 by Sylvie Vanhoozer.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

Chapter 1

ADVENT

THE ART OF WATCHFUL WAITING



*The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.*

*It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:25-26

We may not receive visits from winged angels proclaiming that God has a message for us, but God still speaks to us. Our task as those who would hear is to do all in our power to listen to God's voice speaking to us.

BETH A. RICHARDSON, *CHILD OF THE LIGHT*



WHERE CHURCH CALENDAR AND NATURE MEET

The first Sunday of Advent is the official start of the Christian year. It's a day marked not by parties and fanfare but by the quiet atmosphere of fading autumn days moving into early winter, when nothing much grows anymore in the land of the santons, whether countryside or kitchen garden. Hedges and vineyards barely hold on to leaves that are slowly fading, while the rolling hills and patchwork fields of my

childhood are blanketed in a faint mist that invites repose. Advent, a time of prayerful expectation mixed with a quiet joy of anticipation, similarly invites inner stillness. It is as if nature begins her own Advent, waiting quietly for the season of growth and new life ahead. Christians replay the story of watching and waiting that started millennia ago, when the people of Israel looked forward to the Messiah's coming. Christians know he has come, yet they continue to wait, watchfully.

ADVENT COMES TO PROVENCE

In the land of my ancestors, Advent is when people bring their precious seasonal figurines out of storage, not forgetting the miniature barn with its stone walls and red roof, seemingly taken straight out of the Provençal countryside. According to the ancient carols, Advent marks the season when the shepherds went on their peculiar pilgrimage to Bethlehem. In similar fashion, and in a way that is entirely in keeping with the season, another “holy pilgrimage” starts, this time with real people. Children, parents, and grandparents ramble into the quiet hills to gather material with which to decorate the manger scene. This walk is so special it even has its own name: *La promenade de l'Avent* (Advent walk).¹

By gathering native plants, moss, twigs, and so forth to provide a landscape for the manger scene, we root the crèche, and Jesus himself, in our terroir, our own patch of earth—the same earth, in fact, from which the santons figurines themselves were made, rendering the entire endeavor remarkably organic.² The Advent walk brings plants and people, and a special season of the church year, together in an intimate, unique, and interrelated way.

During these Advent walks, the elders speak softly to the young ones, initiating them into the deep mysteries of their storied place. Thyme is a “manger herb” because, according to legend, Joseph gathered grass and hay from the roadside with which to line the manger and, as soon as the baby's head touched the manger, the grass turned into fragrant herbs—one of which was thyme. Children learn to identify the native thyme by smell when they rub it between their fingers. They watch in

wonder as the thyme sprigs they gathered, inserted into the manger scene, transform into olive trees like the ones that dot their land. They learn that the juniper they collected preserves the scent of the hills and stays green in the crèche throughout the season. Each plant that makes its way into the scenery of the crèche is an integral part of the soil in which the children themselves have their own roots. The Advent walk helps inoculate them from what Wendell Berry calls the “characteristic diseases” of the century, namely, “the suspicion that they would be greatly improved if they were someplace else.”³

Upon their return home, young and old gather around the crèche and deck it out with their local treasures, re-creating a model version of their homeland with the herbs and scents they know so well. Each person has something to place in the scene, a small gift that, in a way, hints at the season of giving ahead. One may even catch a glimpse of a season further ahead in the story, when individual santons will



Juniper leaves and berries

become a fellowship of saints, sharing the gifts with one another they have been given by their risen Lord. With a little imagination, one might say that what ultimately grows out of the crèche gathering is a local church.

In my family’s Christmas crèche, simple brown paper and bark become hills, creases simulate paths, stones stand like ancient boulders along the way. Only when the scene is finally ready do we place the figurines. At first, the holy family is nowhere in sight, nor are the Magi—it is not yet their season. In the beginning of Advent, the crèche keepers

have only *prepared* a place for the baby with the materials of their land. Afterward, however, the younger members of the family tend the crèche daily, adding and moving the little saints about, creating the impression of a bustling village. Now the baker and the miller seem to be in conversation; now the dairy maid comes out of the barn with a jug of milk; now an old man approaches the well with his earthen jars.

Meanwhile, the shepherds are abiding on those makeshift hills with their sheep (also little figurines), grazing on the freshly gathered moss. Shepherds are a familiar sight for anyone who lives in Provence. They are the first visitors to the crèche, just as they are in the Gospels. In the crèche, some shepherds are standing, others are sitting. All are watching and waiting.

THE SEASONAL SANTON

The first little saint we encounter as we set out on our pilgrimage through the seasons is, appropriately enough, a shepherd—*pastre* in the

WEEK 1 ∞ *Pause*

“Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it.”⁴

Plants are mentioned by name throughout the Bible. They clearly matter to God, their Creator, who made each one for a particular place and people. We read about lilies, roses, great cedars, firs, olive trees, vines, rue, and myrtle. In the land of my ancestors, the Advent walk helps us locate our place and plants (and even the baby Jesus) in the Great Story, and in Provence.

🌿 Whether or not you have a manger to decorate, go on an Advent walk in a nature reserve, botanic garden, country path, or city garden. Take slow, measured steps so that you can observe what’s around you, and then try to name the native plants of your locale. (You can use an app like Seek to help you—but then put the phone away!) If you have children, involve them in this treasure

Provençal tongue, hence *pastorales*, the traditional Christmas plays that begin with the angels' announcement to the shepherds keeping watch in their fields by night. The plays follow Luke's Gospel in depicting the shepherds as the first ones to spread the news. The shepherd santon comes dressed in a traditional woolen cape (the wool sheared from his sheep, of course) that turns into a blanket to stave off the cold outdoor nights. The shepherd santon carries his gift for the baby Jesus on his shoulders—like Abel, he offers up his most precious possession, a lamb.



Le berger (the shepherd)

hunt. Gather some local flora to “plant” (i.e., contextualize) the Christmas story in your own place, and in your home.

- ☞ If you already have a manger scene, try to keep to the church calendar instead of rushing the holy family to the manger before their time. Keep the Magi closeted until the proper time (do you know when that is?). Advent watching and waiting can be spiritually formative, both as a teaching tool and a way to enter the season.
- ☞ Invite a neighbor over for coffee and show them your manger (they're great conversation starters!). She may ask you, “Why don't you have the baby Jesus in your manger?” How would you answer that question? Can you explain what makes the special seasons special? Think about the etymology of *holiday* (a “holy day”). Why should certain days be set apart? What should we do on them?

SHEPHERDS IN PROVENÇAL CULTURAL TRADITION

In Provence, people still regard shepherds with quiet respect. These *pastres* belong to the land, and to the landscape, as they have for generations. They figure in our popular stories (not just the pastorales) and they frequently appear in our songs, thanks to Nicolas Saboly, a seventeenth-century French poet and composer. Himself a descendant of shepherds, Saboly was the composer of the first Provençal carols, called *noëls*.

Saboly's beloved carols retell the biblical story of the first Christmas and the angelic announcement to the shepherds, with additional imaginative flourishes thrown in to add local color and detail. The *noëls* eventually became part of the regular repertoire of folk songs of Provence, part of the year-round culture.⁵

The shepherds were the first recorded people, apart from Mary and Joseph, to bear witness to Jesus' birth. And, according to the folk songs, the shepherds began spreading the news about the baby in the manger even as they made their way to see him. More than any other group, then, it is the shepherds who usher in Christmas: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15).

The lyrics of Saboly's carols are down-to-earth, even comical at times, reminding us that these shepherds, while playing a special part in Jesus' story, are just as human as the rest of us. This becomes clear as they make their way to the child Christ: "It's such a long way. We're going to freeze in this wind! Our shirts, our trousers are full of holes. . . . Holes can't keep out the cold. . . . How are we going to manage? . . . I'm afraid we're going to die!"⁶ This is a remarkably realistic picture of the ordinary cares and concerns that are part and parcel of an everyday saint's pilgrimage. On the other hand, Saboly's carols depict place and time somewhat confusedly. It is hard to tell whether the shepherds are on a long, drawn-out journey or whether everything happens in a single night, whether they are headed to Bethlehem or to some remote village in Provence. One might wonder as they wander: Is this an Advent walk or a lifelong pilgrimage? *Oui!*

Before the angels appear to them, the shepherds are minding their own business, up in the hills, watching the sheep, often in humble

isolation, perhaps with a dog as a sole companion. Advent aside, the shepherds were always watching and waiting for something: wolves, wild boars, even highway robbers—anything that might threaten their flock. In the meantime they spend their days, weeks, and months on their own. To be a shepherd is to learn to embrace solitude.

Their solitary vocation evokes respect from the villagers, who in contrast (and by definition) are part of a small community that provides ready-made company. Solitude is no easy accomplishment, especially for a gregarious Mediterranean people. Blaise Pascal said that the root cause of human misery is our inability to sit quietly in our rooms alone.⁷ Yet not everyone who sits alone feels alone; solitude is not the same as loneliness. An everyday saint seeks solitude, an inner quietness, in order to keep watch and wait for God's unexpected advents. As Bible teacher Jan Johnson reminds us: "To take time for silence and solitude means we assume that God wants to speak to us and relate to us in a personal way. . . . we learn to converse with God and hear God—first in solitude, then in all of life."⁸ Such is the purpose of the Advent walk: to prepare the way of the Lord in one's own most particular place—our heart. Advent watching and waiting is a spiritual exercise for which the shepherd serves as our model and teacher.

Alone in the hills, away from the world below, the shepherd develops the art of attentiveness: concern for his charge, alertness to the land, and fondness for the stars above. The Northern Star is known to the French as *l'étoile du berger* ("the shepherd's star"). I cannot help wondering if it was the shepherds' natural attentiveness that led the angels to appear first to them that first Christmas night. Why else were they the first to hear the good news? Perhaps they saw the angels because they had already been practicing their solitary watchful waiting in the fields while "keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8).

MY OWN PILGRIMAGE

I have often recalled those shepherds while taking my own quiet Advent walks, "wondering as I wandered out under the sky" across Yorkshire moors, Grantchester meadows, Edinburgh city parks, Wisconsin woods, and Midwest prairie paths, a permanent resident transplant in

foreign lands. As my travels and the passing of time took me farther and farther away from my native land and beloved hills, I came to realize that something was amiss in my crèche. Even though I was careful to include herbs from Provence, dried and carefully stored from year to year, I sensed there was something out of place.

It was on one of these quiet Advent walks that it finally dawned on me: just as the traditional plays brought the story of Christ into Provence with all its local color, so I too had to bring it into my new place—or rather, I had to incorporate my place into the story of Christ. I therefore decided to bedeck my crèche with plants and shrubs from the surrounding terroir: heather when we lived in Scotland, white pine and prairie grass when we moved to Illinois. The only criterion was that it had to be local. I am here, and “here” is wherever God plants me for a particular season of my life; “here” is where he wants me to live,

WEEK 2 ∞ Pray

“Be still, and know that I am God.” PSALM 46:10

- ☞ Imagine yourself a shepherd, sitting quietly, not talking to God, but just watching and waiting and listening. Find a place where you will not be disturbed. Turn off your cell phone, quiet the voices in your head. Then, for five or six minutes, tell God that you are listening. Ask him to show you how to welcome him into your place this Advent. Then wait. This is his time to talk. This too is prayer.
- ☞ Try to do this every day this week. That’s how habits are formed. Can you do it for ten minutes? Fifteen? The point is to be intentional about making time for quiet listening. Those who listen also watch and wait.
- ☞ God will speak, in his own way, and his own time, if you are attentive—not just now, but throughout the day. Have you heard him?

grow, and welcome the child Christ. The manger scene must therefore reflect my current place, as the Provençal crèche does in and for the land of my ancestors. As one book about the santons puts it: “If we can localize the nativity, we make it contemporary such that it is no longer an exotic mystery but a familiar event.”⁹ *Exactement*.

I have accordingly made a mental shift. I now see my *new* place (wherever God happens to put me) less as a foreign land than a *holy land*, a place set apart in which I can continue to adore the Word become flesh. It was this insight—that Christ



Indiangrass from the prairies

could be reborn, as it were, here, there, and everywhere—that made me realize that I too could belong here, there, and everywhere. I am “here,” far from Provence, a real-life little saint in a new crèche, eager to know, and love, my new environs: the vast prairie with its varied grasses waving over a snow-covered expanse; the white oaks of Illinois lifting their heavy limbs toward the sky; the native juniper, greening and scenting the manger throughout the season. Like the santons who populate my crèche, I found the grace to welcome Christ where I am.

THE ART OF EATING IN SEASON

The kitchen table is another place to practice watching and waiting, this time for the advent of each season’s crops. Ideally, the everyday saints’ food, like the rest of their lives, is organically connected to the local terroir. After all, God created us as embodied beings, and we can only

be in one place at a time. Like prayer, watching and waiting for particular foods to ripen can be a way of sharpening awareness of our perpetual dependence on God, in our place, in and out of season. Advent watching and waiting reminds us, and our children, to be grateful for the created world around us, and to thank the Giver of all good gifts.

Advent is also a season that invites everyday saints to use restraint. For, at least in the northern hemisphere, Advent is a time when the garden begins its annual hibernation. Acknowledging the decreasing harvest is part and parcel of the art of living in season. Eating during Advent means reserving part of the harvest for the next feast: Christmas. Living in correspondence to the season of Advent may require fasting rather than feasting, regardless of the impression that supermarkets give, where it is always Christmas, never winter.

For wise everyday saints, local vegetables are *de rigueur*: cabbages, spinach, legumes (chickpeas in Provence, red beans in Illinois)—the staples of simple soups and stews. Nothing fancy, but nonetheless tastefully prepared. This too is a way of respecting the seasons, the land, and the Lord who created and ordered them.



Swiss chard and thyme

Those who live in sync with the rhythms of the land know that Advent marks the last of Swiss chard, a Mediterranean staple.¹⁰ It is the last gasp of autumn, the last bright green leafy vegetable before the earth enters into the grave of winter. Chard is nothing for a gourmand to write home about, yet it is dressed by nature in festive colors, with its swirly red garland crisscrossing the bright green leaf. In Provence, cooks traditionally

pair it with thyme gathered from the hills, embellished in a béchamel sauce, grilled with croûtons, drizzled with olive oil—perhaps garnished with crumbled bacon when it is dressed in its Sunday best.

Advent is not only about putting off good things until tomorrow, but it is a season of preparation. In the land of my ancestors, some families take little breaks, sampling a few Christmas specialties like nougat and mulled wine when they gather with neighbors to admire each other's crèche on Sundays, which according to the church calendar are minor feast days (they're sometimes called "little Easters"). During the rest of the week, however, they learn the virtue of watchful waiting, preserving rather than consuming the contents of the larder.

WEEK 3 ∞ *Play Your Part*

"We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic." NUMBERS 11:5

The Bible mentions food by specific names throughout the Old and New Testaments—sorrel, cinnamon, honey, gum, wheat, milk, pistachio nuts, almonds, and grapes, to name but a few.

- ☞ Can you name five foods that are harvested or stored by local farmers in your local place during this particular season? Hint: read the "country of origin" at the supermarket or, even better, track down a farmers' market in your area.
- ☞ Procure some seasonal ingredients, then produce a seasonal dish. Then talk about it at the table as a way of introducing the discipline of eating in season. We won't find manna on our doorsteps, as the Israelites did, but we can learn to trust God to provide while waiting for the next harvest.
- ☞ In the passage cited above, Israel complained to God because of the food they did not have anymore. Can you focus, and help others at your table (family and small groups) to focus, on what God has provided, rather than complain about what is no longer available, even as you practice seasonal restraint?

END OF SEASON

Our Advent walk is approaching the threshold of Christmas. In the words of the angel who opens one of the pastorales: “The *Mistral* [a strong cold wind from the north] who is a friend of the Good Lord, decided to prepare the stage by cleansing the sky that night, leaving not a single cloud, so that every star might shine brightly on God’s little one.”¹¹ It is a beautiful thought, nature’s way of preparing for a special season. The whole of creation, which has been watching and waiting, now welcomes the child Christ, just as the shepherd-poet David had said: “The heavens declare the glory of God, / and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). *Now*, the Christmas stage is set. The house is ready. The Guest may enter!

WHAT’S AN EVERYDAY SAINT TO DO?

The shepherds in the old carols faced dark mountain paths, biting cold, little food, and the prospect of brigands taking what little they had, yet they continued to search for the child Christ until they found him in a barnyard, lying between a cow and donkey. A contemporary everyday

WEEK 4 ∞ *Ponder*

“Most of us grew up saying prayers, reading prayers, or listening to others praying. Few of us were challenged to be prayer. There is a difference between a person who says prayers and a prayerful person. It is the difference between something we do and someone we are.”¹²

- ☞ Reflect on the last few weeks: Have you come to see the importance of watching and waiting? Have you learned how? Have you found a dwelling place in your life for the Lord? Think about what it looks like to watch, wait, and welcome Christ in your place.
- ☞ As you begin to listen to God speak throughout the day, note that “devotion” is not just an event at a set time, but an attitude of attentiveness and expectation to maintain throughout the day.

saint might well ask, “What dark paths will I have to take, and what hidden dangers and unknown assailants will I meet on my way to Christ?”

Everyday saints, shepherds or not, should know the seasons of the place where they are planted. They should go on quiet Advent walks, whether in hills, through prairies, or along riverbanks—anywhere away from the distractions of a stressful world, crowded shops, and hectic schedules that tempt them to rush to Christmas before its due season. The art of living in Advent involves remembering: ’tis *not yet* the season (of Christmas). Everyday saints who pay attention to the seasons will use Advent to prepare inwardly the way of the Lord, pondering in their hearts, like Mary, the mystery of the one who came down from heaven to be here—not Bethlehem (or Provence), but *here*: let it be to me, *here*, according to your word (Luke 1:38).

What does this season of Advent really mean for *me*? Much as I love my crèche, Advent is about more than searching the hills for herbs to adorn a model manger. The real art of living in the season of Advent is about learning how to welcome Jesus in my place this Christmas, and in the coming year—and not just in the “official” manger scene, but in all

- 👉 Imagine Advent as the first chapter of a great story in which you are invited to come along. Imagine you are one of those little saints on a pilgrimage to find Christ. Can you see the story of your life as one of holy pilgrimage? You don’t have to leave your place. You just have to be Adventish: prayerfully expecting and preparing to meet Christ where you are.
- 👉 Can you imagine prayer becoming so naturally enmeshed in your daily life that your whole life might end up being prayer? Might praying continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17) be the art of watchful waiting, the art of living in Advent?

the scenes of my everyday life: home, neighborhood, workplace, church, and heart. Everyday saints need time to prepare a fitting welcome for their Lord. This is the reason for the Advent season: to watch and wait, in solitude and attentiveness, for God's active presence, so that as we make our own pilgrimage we can say with David:

I will not give sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
until I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.
(Psalm 132:4-5)

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-art-of-living-in-season