

Was it Worth the Wait?
Matt 1: 18-25
December 23, 2018
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.... they were engaged, "betrothed" to use the common nomenclature. Sure, it wasn't a *done* deal; but betrothal did mean they were *pledged* to each other. Their families had made a contractual agreement. For all intents and purposes, they *were* married, just not living together, until the time for the celebration had come. But in the meanwhile, while they prepared to be together, Joseph gets **this word**: Mary, his wife in *nearly every way*, is pregnant and **he** is not the father. That could only mean one thing: she's been unfaithful. Joseph had two choices: have her stoned to death or divorce her.

We are used to the fairy tale story of the Nativity, straight from the Gospels, of course, but read swiftly so as to get to the parts we love: baby in a manger, "no crying he makes" (song lyrics, not like any baby we know!) and angels in the sky. We are used to the story going according to plan, because who doesn't like that? All neat and tidy, like it should be, like *God* should be. So, when we slow down enough to read *carefully*, when we pause long enough to consider *thoughtfully*, we are confronted with the truth of the matter, the **real** story: this birth was for all purposes what I would call a "hot mess." Nothing went as planned.

Now we are told that Joseph was a "righteous man" and because of this, he made the choice not to have Mary publicly stoned, as was his right, but to "dismiss her quietly", as the story goes. Mishnaic writers give details about what this means, exactly. It seems that Joseph could have divorced Mary by sending her a hand-written letter, informing her that their marriage contract was suspended due to her infidelity. If the bride was under the age of 12 (yes, 12 years

of age), then her father would receive the note. If Joseph would have wanted to reconsider once the letter was on its way, he would only have been able to retract it if it had not yet fallen into Mary's hands; once she had read the letter, the deal would have been done. They would have been divorced and Joseph would have had no way of change his mind.

So, timing matters here! It seems his mind is made up. But about this business of doing all this "quietly": Joseph would have been required to deliver the message of divorce in the presence of two witnesses, one of which could have been the messenger. So at least two other people would have had to know. That's as "quiet" as it would have been.

But Joseph, in fact, does *not* divorce her. In spite of the obvious pain and sense of betrayal he must have felt, regardless of the humiliation and offense he would have assumed, Joseph, the story goes, didn't get the chance to "dismiss" Mary from his life before an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him to "hold on". "Wait up", the angel says. "Don't do it. Don't do what any *other* human being would have done after such an affront, such a change of plan. Take Mary as your wife; it's **not** what it seems. You've nothing to fear."

This was certainly **not** what Joseph waited for, any of it. He was waiting to consummate his marriage with the girl he was promised. He was waiting to live together and begin a family. He was waiting to demonstrate his ability to care for Mary and to raise their children and to pass on his experience as the carpenter he was. **That's** what Joseph was waiting for. Betrayal, divorce, angels...none of it was in his plan. But here he was.... trying to figure out what it might mean to be a "righteous man" in the face of his world gone crazy.

And isn't that how it happens, both in this not so idyllic story, and in our own lives? That what we have waited for doesn't always come. That what we've imagined doesn't always pan

out. The marriage we thought would last forever ends in divorce. The healthiest person in the family is the one who dies from cancer. Surprise pregnancies, disappointing jobs, kids dropping out of school: not what anyone looks for. The happy retirement you worked for turns into endless doctor's visits or the loss of the beloved you thought you'd share it with. What we're waiting for, expecting, doesn't always end up being what we get.

What we've dreamed for our lives and the lives of those we love doesn't always turn out that way we thought it would or should. Not because we were not "righteous" enough; not because we didn't do whatever it was that we should have, could have, done to make it so. But because that's how stories go.... not as planned but as we live them out, all of us, in the midst of life and love and disappointment and sorrow and hopes and dreams and all other manner of things that can, and do, go sideways when we least expect it. What we wait for doesn't always come.

This story of Jesus' birth isn't neat and tidy; it's fraught with pain and disappointment, uncertainty and fear—*lots of fear*; which is why angels keep showing up to tell everyone, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, not to be afraid! This tale of God's Incarnation is not what folks were waiting for; not Mary or Joseph, not the people of Israel, not the world to which God came. No one was waiting for an unexpected infant born inconveniently when there was a census going on and travel was difficult and no rooms available. All that was small stuff relative to unwanted pregnancy and undetermined fatherhood.

No one was waiting for this.... But **look what they got**: Joseph got a visit from an angel, strengthening him with the promise of salvation. Mary got a similar visit, and a fast friend in her relative Elizabeth and support from a risk-taking partner. Shepherds, Wise Ones, even us: look

what we got! God's love made manifest in human form! Light breaking into darkness; hope dispelling fear and gloom.

The Good News is that it is **into** the "hot mess" of our lives that God comes! **To us, as us**. We don't have to be a "righteous" anything for God to show up. We can have one plan and God can still do God's thing, which is often not our own. We can wait for something and God can do something *more* amazing and spectacular than we ever thought or dreamed of. Our stories can be as messy as this story; our hearts can be as broken as Joseph's heart. Our fears can be as wild as Mary's and our surprise as great as shepherds. And God will come! *Still*, God will come. To be born in us, to live among us. Because Love wins. Because Light shines. Because Christ is born.... once, and over and over again.

Born when we open ourselves to hear the voices God sends to us. Born when we still ourselves to receive the angels God sends. Born when we dare to risk what is for what can be. Born when we offer ourselves in humility before the Begotten One.

Was it worth the wait? I hope you will think so.

Will you get what you were waiting for? Maybe not after all.

But I pray that you will trust that what God *has to* give you is more than you can hope for or imagine. Open yourself to receive this gift.

Gracious and Loving God,

We have nearly arrived, after weeks of waiting, to the day of your birth, your coming among us again and again.

Some of us are filled with joyful expectation: everything is going as planned, everyone we wish will be present; the gifts are wrapped, the baking done...all we have to do is wait!

Some of us are filled with concern: Not everything is done nor how we hoped it would be. Not all who we'd wish will be at the table. We might not even have a table....all we can do is wait!

Remind us that the time of waiting is nearly over;

Remind us that what will come will come.

Instill in us not the desire for perfection, but for peace.

Not for everything we long for but for everything you long to give us.

Help us to notice the difference, between what we want and what we need.

Help us to accept graciously the gifts you give that in receiving what you offer to us the Christ might truly be born within us, full of light and love and life, the greatest gifts of all.

Hear our prayers, Merciful God:

As we wait these final hours, fill us with the gift of your Holy Spirit, that we might embody the Love you bring. May our words and deeds enact the hope of salvation that is born to us. May we open our hearts to find room for the immigrant and stranger, remembering that Mary and Joseph had no place to sleep.

May we share our wonder for beauty and surprise, remembering shepherds who left the ordinary to experience the extraordinary.

May we trust your leading, remembering Wise Ones who followed faithfully in order to worship you.

God of Advent waiting, come quickly now. And we will give thanks in the name of the One you sent, amen.

