

What Are You Waiting For?  
Luke 1:39-55  
Dec 2, 2018  
Advent I  
Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

It was not lost on me as the events of the week unfolded that I had decided weeks ago to focus our attention on waiting during this Advent season. We have been waiting: waiting for things to get better, waiting to figure out what direction we're headed, waiting for folks to return or to stop wishing they would. I've done my own waiting this week as I prepared to move, yesterday, and was confronted with a snafu in relationship to my new mortgage. It wasn't a fun week!

I was thinking about all the waiting we do over the course of just an ordinary day: we wait in lines at stores, we wait in restaurants, grocery stores and post offices. Some of us wait for public transportation and others wait in traffic: did you know one estimate suggests that over a 70-year life-span, we spend fully two-three *years* waiting in traffic?! The list just goes on and on! Even the things that have been invented to lessen our waiting time add to it in some way it seems; we wait for the latest gadget to be released that will lessen our waiting!

What many of us have learned from all this waiting is how little we care for it! The faster and more efficiently services are provided for us, the faster and more efficient we expect them to be. We have little tolerance for waiting, little patience for standing still. And yet that is *exactly* what the season of Advent invites us to: a season of slow-paced reflection in the midst of frenetic hurry; a season of patience in the midst of rush; a season of holy listening in the midst of a cacophony of noise. Advent invites us to a season where we join God in waiting to be born!

Throughout this Advent season, we will focus our attention on waiting, wondering as we do today with Mary and Elizabeth, what might be born in us? What new thing might God be bringing to life in our own hearts and lives? What new thing might God be nurturing in the life and ministry of our congregation? Can we recognize in ourselves the pregnant moments of possibility that lie within us, women and men, young and old, at any time? What are you waiting for, in your own heart, your own life, your own spirit, this Advent season?

As I considered the text for today, I was reminded of what I tell my Temple students: the most difficult text to read closely are those which we think we already know, those which we already understand. It is the same reality which makes the Advent texts difficult; we think we already know what they say! Of course, at some level we do...but the challenge is always to discover what they say to us anew.

This story of Mary's conception and her visit with Elizabeth is one of the most familiar Advent texts....what does it say about waiting? What does it say about what is waiting to be born in me and you?

I notice that the stories of these two women are woven together; it is difficult to separate one from the other. Elizabeth's is the story of a woman in old age, post-menopausal, deep in the years of wisdom. She has never had a child but doubtless she has given birth—to her own sense of self, to significant relationships, to faithful following of the God of her life. She comes to live in a new way when she is gifted with pregnancy: "This is what the Lord has done for me," she says as she waits again for God.

Nearly at the same time we are introduced to Mary, the story of a young woman, rich in fertility, beginning her covenant relationship with Joseph, full of promise and life. She comes

to live in a new way when she is gifted with pregnancy; “here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

So here are Elizabeth and Mary, two women at opposite places in the endless cycle of life, each surprised by the promise and possibility of God bringing to birth something new, something holy, something transforming in each of them! Who knew this could happen to an old woman? Who knew this could happen to a young girl? Who knew that God could break into our seemingly mundane existences and plant in us the hope of new life!

Mary and Elizabeth weave the blessing, share the burden, succor the surprise in the company of one another: this waiting is a difficult thing. New life does not come easily, without pain and cost. What would people say about an old woman suddenly pregnant?! Imagine it was *you!* Really! *Imagine* it was you! What would they say about a young girl expecting? Really! *Imagine* it was you! Scorn, ridicule, laughter, disbelief....Elizabeth and Mary take shelter in each other, fearfully confident in the womb of mysterious belief.

What is waiting to be born in us? If not babies, (Oh heavens!) then what *is* God wanting to bring to life? Can you imagine it? Feel it? Believe it? That God *does* want to bring something to life in you?! Perhaps there is that nagging voice somewhere inside your head...or is it your spirit?—that urges you to start off in a new direction, leave an old burden, discover a new vocation, make peace with an alienated friend? Perhaps there is a loud grumbling in your gut, a trembling in your limbs that is pushing you to give up a destructive person or pattern, create a new reality, live into a live-long fantasy, make that dreaded change...now. What is waiting to be born in us, as a congregation? Can you feel it? Imagine it? Believe it?

What hunger rumbles in your spirit? A deeper faith, a life of prayer, a way to begin or begin again? What longing wakes you in the darkness? What keeps your feet on the ground while your spirit struggles to take wing? **Who** do you need to let go of? **What** do you need to embrace? **Where** do you need to travel to? **When** will you resist the urge to run?

This Advent time, this season of waiting, is the gestation of our innermost beings! It comes to us in the midst of all that we already are and do, and like an angel on our doorsteps, startles us into the presence of God. This Advent time, this season of waiting, is the most potent time of our spiritual lives. The days and hours weigh heavy with promise and expectation: something is about to be born...not just to us and for us, but most of all, *within* each and every one of us!

US! As old as Elizabeth! Us! As young as Mary! Us as frightened as Joseph! Us! As dumbstruck as Zechariah. This pregnant moment is *our* moment! This season of opportunity is *our* birthing place. The place where God comes and sits down with us and whispers in our ears. The time when God invites us to stay close to one another as we wait for all things new.

“There is a place within us that God seeks to occupy,” write Renita Weems (*Showing Mary*, 93) Advent gives us the time we need to invite God in. Weems continues, “We’ve spent much of our lives believing that we are human beings who happen to have a spiritual side, when the truth is that we are spiritual beings who happen to be cloaked in human form...The holy beyond you is reaching out to the holy within you...” (67). Both conceived and conceiving, both giving birth and being born. This is the joy, the work, the wait of Advent...to open ourselves to the Holy who is already present, who is already inviting, who is already creating the pathway of newness we long for, the vision of wholeness we dare to receive.

Sister Marcina Wiederkehr invites us to pray this prayer:

“O God who creates something out of nothing

Compassionate shaper of clay, tiller of the soil, Midwife God---I am ready to be born.

I’m giving up the darkness of the womb.

I’m waiting for the life that you alone can give.

A little light slipped through a crack last night and covered up my fears.

A promise leaned against my heart last night and told me it was mine.

And you were that promise, Lord, and you were that light.

It’s enough to make me hope again. I’m giving up the night. (*Seasons of the Heart*, 151)

What is waiting to be born in you this Advent season?

What is waiting to be born?