
Waiting with Mary and Joseph

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21 December 2025

Isaiah 7:10-16 • Matthew 1:18-25



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's readings seem to be about signs and prophecies. We are in that time of year when Bible prophecies are being fulfilled. Christmas and Easter, the two most important dates in the Christian year, also are the times about which there is the most prophecy in the Old Testament. Many verses point ahead to Jesus Christ, particularly in Isaiah and Micah. This morning we heard how God spoke through Isaiah, saying, "Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Is 7:14). This prophecy comes to pass with Mary and Joseph and the child born to her. And other prophecies in Isaiah also point to Jesus: the Suffering Servant, and the passage about the root coming from the stump of Jesse, to name two. It's important for us to understand these writings from the Hebrew Scriptures, so that we may more properly understand what the Gospels tell us, and to better know what God's plans for humanity are. They also help us to understand how the people of Jesus's time saw Jesus, and what impact his coming had on their lives. Those Jews who knew their scriptures were able to look back in the scrolls (remember Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah in Luke chapter 4?) and see how his coming had been foretold —

although, of course, many of them did not believe it, or would not make the connection and would not accept Jesus as the one. But those who did must have been tremendously reassured and thankful that God's words had been fulfilled.

But how long a time they, as a people, had to wait until this prophecy came true! Isaiah was written about seven centuries before Christ was born on earth. We see yet again how God's time is not our time. Sometimes — often — we must wait to see the salvation and the grace of God.

And we're still waiting. Advent is a time of waiting: waiting for the birth of our Saviour. We know he is coming, just as we know that after his Resurrection, he will come again. James, believed to be the brother of Jesus, wrote, "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord" (James 5:7). James was writing about waiting for Jesus's second coming, not his first, but the idea is the same.

It is hard for us to be patient. It is hard for us to wait. Waiting in line is frustrating. Waiting in traffic is maddening. These days, it seems that everybody wants everything right now, if not yesterday. We're not as good at waiting as we used to be. Long projects are annoying; we want quick results.

Yet the very biggest thing we are waiting for, the day of the Lord, will come. The best expression of this is in Psalm 27:

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord! (Ps 27:13-14)

Be strong, have courage — and wait.

There is a substance to waiting, if you will. It is not just the absence of action; it is not just anticipation of a future event. It has a meaning in and of itself. A man named Vanstone wrote a little book called *The Stature of Waiting* in which he spoke about the value of the process of waiting. His idea is that those who are forced to be idle, perhaps through illness or circumstances outside their control, are actually doing something constructive. He developed this idea through his study of the Passion of Jesus, that terrible period of Jesus' life from his arrest through to his crucifixion. It is the Passion because Jesus during that time was passive — that is, things were being done to him which he could not control. Previous to his arrest, Jesus was very active, walking around, preaching and teaching, taking action. After his arrest, he had to wait patiently for what would happen. He went from action to passion, and things happened to him. He did not make them happen.

In Joseph's case, he was already waiting for his wedding. He was betrothed, that is, he had promised to marry Mary. In that time in Israel, a man promised to

marry a woman, like our engagement. The couple would not live together until the wedding. But their promise was more legally binding than our modern engagement. The woman was already considered to be his wife. If a man broke that promise, he was required to pay money to the woman's father. The most serious thing would be for the woman to become pregnant. In that case, she could be liable to death by stoning, if she willingly slept with a man. The rules were spelled out in the Book of Deuteronomy:

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you.

But if out in the country a man happens to meet a young woman pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. Do nothing to the woman; she has committed no sin deserving death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor, for the man found the young woman out in the country, and though the betrothed woman screamed, there was no one to rescue her. (Deut. 22:25-27)

Since Joseph knows that he did not sleep with Mary, he has to assume some other man has, and assuming also that it wasn't rape, Mary might be executed. But Joseph is a righteous man, a man of peace, and he does not want that for Mary. Nor does he want even to embarrass her in public. By marrying her, he saves her from this. So Joseph is a willing participant in God's plan. He marries Mary.

It must have been an interesting period for both Mary and Joseph, that period of Mary's pregnancy. Both of them have been told — by angels! — that the child will be great; in fact, he will be the Son of God! Would they not have been anxious to see this child? A young couple expecting their first baby are excited enough; how much more would this couple be full of wonder and excitement! And they can do nothing but wait to see the outcome of this part of God's plan.

And we are in a similar situation, if you think about it. We are in a passion ourselves, in the sense of looking forward, but completely unable to affect in any way what we are waiting for: the return of our Saviour. As far as the second coming of Jesus is concerned, we can do nothing about it. Nothing we do will hurry Jesus along or cause him to come more quickly. We must simply wait. And not knowing when he will come makes the waiting more difficult.

But our waiting is not just the absence of action, a negative thing. Our waiting is positive, for we have hope, given us through Jesus' sacrifice. We have a purpose, for we have received instruction from Jesus on how to live and what is important: serving God and our fellow humans. This time of waiting is a time

for us to work on our relationships with others, both at the personal level and in a greater sense of relations among peoples. The kingdom which God will establish is built on love, compassion and service. We should be practicing these things now in order to be ready. Above all, we must work on our relationships with God, who will judge us according to our faith. So we have things to do while we wait — we can't just sit around!

And what we are waiting for will be glorious. Isaiah talks some more about it in the passage this week. We've had two passages in the last few weeks about the peaceable kingdom, when no one will hurt or destroy, and all people and animals will live together in peace. Isaiah talks about great things: the healing of the land and the healing of the people. The deserts will turn to lakes, and the wilderness will blossom. We may without too much imagination turn this into a hopeful vision of healing our earth from overuse and mismanagement. Where there is drought, there will be water in plenty. Where there are forest fires, there will be new growth. Where crops have failed, there will be new growth and abundance.

Not only will God's earth be healed, but God's people as well. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened; the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." So many people are ravaged by disease or ill-treatment. So many struggle with the basics of life. So many don't know whether they will eat today or not. But God will "strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees" (Is 35:3). Isaiah is a true prophet. When God's kingdom does come on earth, whenever that is, it will be glorious. In the meantime, we have our orders. In the meantime, God works through us to heal the sick, feed the poor, care for his beautiful land.

Perhaps we need practice to wait. A small example: whenever I am in a doctor's waiting room these days, I look around at the others waiting with me. Almost without exception everyone is looking at their phones. Now, I have nothing against cell phones; I use mine constantly. But sometimes I find it good to simply sit, together with my thoughts, or even to say a silent prayer or two. In such a way do we come to know ourselves, and God, better. It is good to practice waiting, even just for a few minutes. We may even come to understand why Jesus is taking so long to come, if God grants us that knowledge. With prayer comes understanding.

In hope, in grace, we all wait together for the coming of the kingdom of God. May God bless us and empower us to be true servants as we wait. In Jesus' name. Amen.