

“Waiting”
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Luke 1:38a

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord...’”

Wait, wait, wait. We wait..., and we wait..., and then we wait some more. Sometimes it seems as though waiting is the one constant of our lives. Waiting has become so ingrained in our lives that we do not give it much thought except to regard it impatiently as a waste of our time. In today’s readings from the first chapter of Luke’s gospel we found others who have waited, but maybe not exactly as we wait.

Zechariah, a priest in the Jerusalem temple, was waiting to speak again. The angel Gabriel waited for Mary to ask a question in the middle of his miracle annunciation. John the Baptist and Jesus were waiting to be born. And even God had waited until that particular time and place to enter as a human into the salvation history of the world. Yet in the center of all these waiting males are two women who are pregnant, expectant, waiting. Many of us here, directly or indirectly, know how very long that wait for a baby can be. Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife, had waited a long time hoping to become pregnant. Even though she was described as righteous and observant of God’s law, she had endured years of scorn from her neighbors because she had not yet been able to conceive and bear a child. She was assumed to be barren and therefore unable fulfill what in her time, and sometimes today, was considered the essential purpose of a woman. When finally in her old age, she miraculously became pregnant, it is no wonder that she chose to wait, hidden in her home, rather than subject herself to more scorn from those who already judged her and found her wanting. Having waited so many years to become pregnant, it is possible that nine months of waiting for her child to be born may not have seemed that long to Elizabeth, especially when at her sixth month, her time of waiting was shared through an unexpected visit by her young cousin Mary.

Mary was so very young, she was hardly more than a child and still a virgin. She was only betrothed when she found herself miraculously expecting a baby. In first century Nazareth Mary could have suffered worse than her neighbors’ scorn. The man to whom she was promised could not only have chosen to reject her, but he could also have been the leader of her public stoning, stoning her even to death. We cannot help but wonder if Mary would not have preferred to

wait even longer before hearing the good news the angel Gabriel brought to her from God.

But there they are in Elizabeth's sixth month, the older woman and the younger woman sharing a time of waiting. Of course during this time they would also be waiting on the other members of Zechariah's household: grinding grain, preparing meals, fetching water, tending children, and whatever else their expected duties were. And certainly young Mary would have waited on her cousin whose third trimester must have been made more difficult by her age. Yet Elizabeth also attended to Mary, affirming and reassuring her in her unexpected pregnancy as she called Mary blessed among women. Each of these women in her own way exemplified what is perhaps the greatest gift women have: the ability to intimately share their joys and concerns with one another. The young Mary respected the wisdom of a life lived in her older cousin, and the aging Elizabeth helped her young cousin recognize her gift and the value of that gift. In waiting on each other, they form a community of caring.

All of us in our community of faith, women and men, children and adults, know what it is to wait **for** something. We wait for grades, for jobs, for presents at Christmas; we wait for prayers to be answered. We all wait to be born, we wait to become independent, and sometimes we wait to die. Both men and women in this church wait **on** each other in a variety of ways – in communal meals, childcare, education, visitation, prayer, and worship. We wait on each other in sharing bread and wine. We wait on others in Houma, Chicago, Washington, Wheeling, Thailand, Togo – in all our mission efforts. However, I doubt in any of our waiting we would readily call ourselves servants of God, which is exactly what Mary called herself when she said to Gabriel, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." We might be put off hearing Mary say this in our modern world, where we are all too aware of abuse done to women and children, today and through history, by those in positions of power over them.

However, the Greek word Luke uses in Mary's declaration is "doo-lay"; meaning a female servant who waits on another. An interpreter's attention is immediately called to this word because it is only found three times in the entire New Testament, each time used by the author of Luke-Acts. He uses it twice in today's chapter, referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is used again early in Acts when Luke describes the Holy Spirit coming to both men and women servants. Luke is not calling Mary a handmaid of the Lord in any way meant to be derogatory, oppressive, demeaning, or abusive. Yes, Luke is talking about someone who is subservient, but subservient to God alone. First century Jews like Elizabeth and Mary would consider being God's servant the most faithful way to live, whether young or old. Luke, who constantly uses Old Testament

phrases in his writing, in order to preserve continuity between the old faith of Israel and the new faith in Christ which was just being born, uses servant terminology in the same manner as the psalmist does in Psalm 130 – today’s prayer of forgiveness. Both the gospel writer and the psalm writer speak of waiting on the Lord. This kind of waiting is seen as the very essence of faithful belief. Elizabeth calls Mary blessed not only because she will be the mother of God, but also because she has believed that Gabriel’s word from God would be fulfilled in her. To wait on God as God’s servant means to constantly be in prayer, to at all times be attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and to allow the rhythm of life to be grounded in the knowledge scripture.

There is no waiting at all on either Mary’s or Elizabeth’s part in acknowledging that the miracles of their pregnancies are the work of God in them. As those who serve God, both women were certain that the Spirit of God could and did move in their lives. For Mary and Elizabeth there is nothing unnatural about a young peasant woman bearing the Son of God or about an old barren woman becoming pregnant with a child who will become great before God. They know with all certainty that nothing is impossible with God. These women who waited on God exulted in their service to God, felt themselves to be magnified by this service, and spontaneously sang joyous praise to the One they served.

And, if we look deeply enough into this narrative of Luke’s, or indeed the entire biblical narrative, we realize that God, the one who is served, is also the one who waits the most. This one, who is God-with-us, is the divine waiter. God, who promises steadfast love and mercy through all generations, waits upon us, attentive to our bitter cries from the depths of despair or doubt. God waits to hear our prayers. God waits for us to repent so that we may be redeemed. God waits on us in and through God’s presence, as we worship, offering our praise and thanksgiving. God’s Spirit sustains us in the waiting of all our times and ages. Most especially, we are waited on by God in Christ, who enters our humanity in the form of a servant, turning upside down all our notions about those on whom we are to wait and establishing for all time who it is we are to serve. Like Elizabeth and Mary we are to be attentive, obedient, and righteous servants of God.

In New Testament Greek, as in our own language today, the words “waiting” and “serving” often become intertwined in shared meanings. In our waiting on each other, and on people outside of our congregation, we too, serve. But, are we servants of God or ourselves? Do we pray in our serving and waiting? Do we listen, quietly and patiently, attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit? Is our faith founded on the scriptures of Old and New Testaments? Are we obedient to the word of God above all else? Do we accept the unexpected as somehow following the plans of God? Are we ever alert to ways God may be using us as instruments

of peace and justice? Do we believe we become greater by serving God? Does everything with which God favors us cause us to exult in joyful praises to the One who has given all for us? When will we fully understand that God is the one and only constant of our lives? How long will we make God wait for us to become servants of the word of God?

Well, that's a lot of questions, but I'm not going to wait for your answers, because I can only answer for myself. And I know with utter certainty that I do not even come close to waiting on God with the faithfulness of the psalmist, Elizabeth, and Mary.

May God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, keep us waiting in hope that the one who began in the incarnation what seemed to be impossible to the world will favor us with servanthood as faithful and obedient as that of aged Elizabeth and young Mary. Amen.