

Text: Luke 1: 26-38
Title: Expectant Waiting
Date: 12.20.20
Roger Allen Nelson

In her fine sermon last Sunday, Erin put it this way:

All of life is Advent. All of life is liminal space – that sense of being in-between what is known and what is unknown. It's a feeling we know well this year. It's unnerving to be sure, but it's also an opportunity... a graced time when we're not certain or in control, when something genuinely new can happen. We're empty, receptive, an erased tablet waiting for new words....

All of life is Advent.
I like that.

An orthodox reading of the Gospels frames life that way: God in Christ has come; God in Christ is coming again. We live in the in between. We await the second coming of God. And so, the question is: How then do we wait? As we wait for a vaccine, wait for dinner, wait in line, wait for church to reopen, how do we wait for the coming of God?

Dear friends, when I charted this Advent preaching path, I looked at the texts for each week and thought:

- Advent 1 – We wait in the wilderness.
- Advent 2 – We wait in repentance.
- Advent 3 – We wait in a liminal space.
- Advent 4 – We wait in expectation.

Good enough. That'll preach! And, on the 4th Sunday of Advent, I'll liken our waiting to a young couple expecting a first child. Given all the babies born at Hope over the last 18½ years, I know a little bit about that journey. Everyone loves baby stories. I'm in good shape. And I let it go at that.

Except....

Except, when I reread this morning's text I was knocked off my path.

This isn't about the journey of a pregnancy; this is about divine disruption.
This isn't about waiting on God; this is about being startled by God.
This doesn't fit the familiar pattern of a long barrenness and God making a way where there was no way. This isn't Sarah, Hannah, or Elizabeth.
This is the story of God breaking in – out of the blue, with no warning or screening process, with no preconditions, without checking schedules or qualifying standards.
This isn't about expectation; this is about the unexpected.

Consider...

Mary was a young woman minding her own business. She could have been weaving bridesmaid dresses, watering the garden, or walking the dog when an angel appears and her world is turned on its head.

Of course, life is never the same after a baby. The birth of every child is an interruption – a glorious, more-love-than-your-heart-can-hold interruption – but Mary had no idea what she is in for. She had no idea the joy or the pain. She had no hint of the cradle or the cross. Whatever her plans they're dislodged and whatever dreams reconfigured. She was an anonymous-every-girl, when God interrupts.

Martin Luther, the sixteenth century reformer, in a Christmas sermon suggested that there are three miracles in the Nativity: One, “that God and man should be joined in this Child.” Two, “that a mother should remain a virgin.” Three, “that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her.” But then Luther adds these lines:

The last (miracle) is not the least of the three. The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become man is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is it that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God.

God broke in and Mary believed.

God intruded and Mary responded, “Let it be according to your word.”

God interrupted and Mary prayed “Let it be....”

And so, maybe, the question is not how do we wait for God, but are we open to divine interruption? When we're minding our own business – weaving, watering or walking the dog – is it possible that God would interrupt and be born again in our hearts and lives?

With you I miss all the traditions and accoutrements of Christmas this year. I miss the choir, a sanctuary stuffed full of friend and family singing carols, parties brimming over with Christmas cheer, greetings in the narthex on Christmas Eve.

Like you, I love kids in costumes retelling the Nativity story, the lights in my grandson's eyes, all manner of beautiful and schmaltzy music, the promise of pie and collective good cheer. Christmas is layered with nostalgia and idealized memories. I won't forget coming out of a candle lit Christmas Eve service with my mom to softly-falling-snowflakes on a silent night – all is calm, all is bright.

And in some ways, that's enough. The spirit of Christmas is born anew as we remember and rehearse the birth story of Jesus. Even this year as we're separated from or grieving loved ones there are still signs and symbols of Christmas hope and kindness.

But, dear friends, there must be more than that. There must be more than memory, tradition and warm feelings. The Nativity is little more than a beautiful story for beautiful children unless it wedges open the possibility that God butted-in in Jesus Christ and creation's fabric is irrevocably altered.

The in-breaking of God in Christ means that creation isn't closed but porous.

And that is to say that this world and its functioning is open to divine intervention. The visitation of God – unbidden, unexpected, and wholly initiated by God – means we're not alone and can't rule out that God is still intruding, intervening, and active in our lives. Therefore, no matter your station in life or your struggle this morning, God would still greet you in the same way the angel greeted Mary:

The Lord is with you... Don't be afraid...
The Lord is with you... Don't be afraid...

Thanks be to God.

After the angel tells Mary not to be afraid and breaks the news of her impending pregnancy, Mary asks, like any of us would, "How will this happen?" The angel's response is that the power of God will "overshadow" her.

The Greek word here means to envelop, cast shade on, or something like "enfold into a cloud." It is the same word used when God spoke out of a cloud to Peter, James and John on the mountain of transfiguration. The angel answers Mary that without some other intermediary God will "overshadow" her.

The Creator of the cosmos will break-in to impregnant Mary. What Luther refers to as a "mere trifle." And in response, overshadowed and overwhelmed, Mary breathes a prayer of remarkable courage.

Let it be according to your word.

Dear friends, the astonishing claim of the gospels is that while the conception was "immaculate," conceived in mystery, the gestation and birth are amidst blood and feces, in pain and travail, in light and shadow, the fullness of being human...

And, even this year, as we're reminded of our frailty and fallenness, this story tethers us again to the faith that God is intimately and intractably invested in human life. God became wholly dependent on the womb of a young woman that we might know the way and will of God.

It may seem farfetched. It cuts against rationality and all manner of human evidence. And the issue of Mary's virginity has made for robust theological and cultural debate, but our calling is to join Mary without fear in the shade of God's inbreaking, to trust God's will and way, and to wait for God's coming.

Let it be according to your word.

One more thing....

This turn of events prompts Mary to sing. But she doesn't sing a dainty-ditty about being a virgin and the joy within her womb. Rather, Mary sings about the promises of God being fulfilled. Mary sings of creation's *shalom* – where the powerful proud have lost their grip, the rich rulers have been ousted, and the present order of things is flipped over like a turtle on its shell.

And! It is worth noting that the verbs in her song are all past tense. They celebrate something that has already happened. That's an odd turn for a song sung in pregnancy. But, as Mary sings, maybe the past tense means that what God has done in Mary's womb is the decisive in-breaking act.

It is a done deal.

Don't be afraid.

God has come to us as a zygote, as an embryo, as a fetus, as a baby.

God has become one of us that we might become one with God.

Thanks be to God.

Let's sing.

Amen.