

The Sounds of Christmas: A Longing Sigh

Preached by

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Reflection

"We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun in us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more."

Henri Nouwen

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-6

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Gospel Reading : Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Meditation: *The Sounds of Christmas: A Longing Sigh*

Both of our readings today are traditional for the season and likely some of the texts most familiar to us. Because we are looking nostalgically far back into the past—past the first Easter, past the first Christmas, it's hard for us to remember that when the texts for Isaiah and for Luke were written, people were looking longingly to the future for what was yet to be.

In the time of Isaiah, people were looking for a king—not just any king, but one who would rule with justice and mercy, without an eye to the pocketbooks of the recipients of said justice and mercy—one who would make decisions without a focus on personal gain. They were looking longingly into the future for a king

who would serve as God had decreed the kings of the people of God should serve. Isaiah's word from the Lord was that the people's longing for such a king would be ended—by God's own power. The promised one would come from the house of David as had been decreed to a longing people more than four centuries earlier.

Eight centuries after Isaiah wrote, the people in Mary's time were still waiting for the fulfillment of those promises. Twelve centuries, a millennium plus two hundred years—that is a long-time longing. And what they had been longing for certainly not a baby—especially not a baby with potentially scandalous parentage—a baby who would only set them up for more longing years until he reached adulthood, if that was the plan. Apparently that was the plan. Even after the baby was born, her longing, the longing of her people who have been longing for rescue, salvation, freedom and justice will not be ended. Mary, her people, and we, with straining eyes and prayerful hearts, continue trying to discern the fulfillment of God's promises in ways they and we never imagined.

The people of Israel, Isaiah and Mary were not caught up in a passive wasting longing. They sang. They bore children, giving them meaningful names. They escaped or endured. They watched. They wept. They prayed. They told of the promises of God. For all of them, through the long years and centuries, it was to them according to the word of the angel of God.

For us, too, the longing has lasted at least another two millennia—not until child's coming, not until his ministry, not until his death and resurrection, but until God's rule on earth is established. It has taken/is taking much longer than anyone anticipated:

through famine and plague

through more wars to end all wars than we can count

through flood and fire and earthquake

through destruction wrought by creation and destruction wrought by human endeavor

through ethnic cleansing and genocide which are someone's solution to who knows what problem

through the winds and fires and droughts of a groaning creation.

through too much gun violence and racism and the ever-widening divide between the haves and the have nots.

through a pandemic that shows few signs of abating, but continues to take its show on the road.

Through all of that, we are longing still for the promised rule of God, justice and mercy for all, a return to the thriving creation of Eden and peace on earth. We are longing still.

Oddly, with 18 months of a pandemic under our belts, we may be more in tune with centuries of longing and even our own longing for the other aspects of the rule of God on earth in this year than any year in our memories or experience. Last Christmas we told ourselves and one another this Christmas would be different—and so it is, but not quite what we have been longing for.

At such a time, it is good to look toward our ancestors in faith and on this day, especially we might look to Mary. After some reflection and some inadequate explanations from the messenger of God, Mary agreed to participate in this holy enterprise. Her long wait did not keep her from believing in the promises of God; her longing did not keep her from taking a risk; her questions did not keep her from agreeing to be a participant in a bold experiment.

In these moments, as we long for a new day, Advent reminds us to follow Mary's example. Like Mary, we are favored ones, given the gift of hope to bear into the world. Like Mary, we have a choice about whether it will be with us according to God's word and whether we will accept the gift along with the responsibilities it brings. Like Mary, we will find that as circumstances change and new challenges arise, we will be called to choose again and again to be vessels of God's love and compassion in the world. Like Mary, we will need to be able to measure the words we hear against what we know of the word of God as it is spoken to us through scriptures and through people of faith unto our own day. Like Mary we will need to struggle with the difference among the world as we expect or want it to be, as it is, and as God might have it be. Like Mary, we will be obligated to be caretakers of the gifts we are given and to use them according to God's good purposes. Like

Mary's, our waiting is not to be a passive thing. We wait as healers; as dispensers of mercy; as workers for justice and peace; as servants who make sacrifices; as those who build up the poor, the powerless and the sick; as tellers of the good news; as visioners and bearers of hope. Like Mary, we must realize these gifts are not given to us for self alone but for the sake of the whole weeping world.

As Scripture tells the story, it took Mary only a few minutes to integrate all this and break into song about the wonder of the opportunities before her. It was the first song of many. Again, and again the faithful would lift their voices in dark days, creating music to raise the spirit of hope, even as text raised the images of that hope.

We are the descendants of a woman and a baby born long ago. We are heirs of the promises, of the Scripture, of sacrifice and witness, and of the faithful resonant music of all who have gone before us. As we raise our voices in song this Advent, let the songs be to us, not nostalgia for days gone by, but Spirit-empowered vehicles reminding us of promises already kept; words come true and vision projected. In our worship and singing, let us be energized for active longing as we move toward the vision which is already being fulfilled by the Word, power and purposes of God.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: As begin the journey to Bethlehem together and prepare for the coming of your Son, we pray that we might keep a holy watch

that our eyes remain open to the need around us

that our responses remain generous

that we return impatience in driving and shopping with smiles and good will and

grow our own patience with supply line shortages that are merely
inconvenience and not life-threatening

that we take time to listen to the fears and hopes of those around us

that our gratitude for what we have and what we are about to receive is
expressed in prayers and service

with the sick and the mourning, the hungry and the lonely, the storm and fire battered and the
war ravaged

May we treat ourselves, those with whom we live and our neighbors with kindness, gentleness and mercy, so that the hope that is possible with you might sustain and encourage us this year

We pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done**

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power

and the glory forever. Amen.