

We are not very good at waiting.

We live in a culture that despises delay and mistrusts anything that cannot be delivered immediately. We wait in checkout lines and feel irritation rise in our chests. We wait for emails and refresh our screens again and again. We wait for diagnoses, for decisions, for test results, for apologies that may or may not come. We wait for justice. We wait for peace. We wait for systems to change. We wait for wounds—personal and communal—to heal.

And if we are honest, over time, waiting wears us down.

Waiting feels like wasted time. And in a culture obsessed with productivity, waiting can feel like failure.

And yet—Scripture tells a different story.

Many churches—and many of us—have spent the last several weeks preparing for Christmas. It is hard *not* to be busy. Hard not to rush. Hard not to feel the pressure to make everything just right.

Right after Halloween, the stores explode with decorations. Christmas music begins long before Advent ever does. The sun sets before we get home from work and rises while children are still heading out the door to school. And everything in us starts to feel like Christmas should already be here.

The world tells us it is already time to celebrate. But it isn't really. Not quite yet.

Our Western version of Christmas is not *wrong*—but it is incomplete. It tells us Christmas is about coziness. About nostalgia. About warmth and familiarity and sentiment. A sentimental Christmas asks very little of us. It reassures us that nothing really needs to change.

But the first Christmas—the real Christmas—was not sentimental. It was dangerous and disruptive and it was a bright light shining into deep, real darkness.

When we substitute the hard, honest waiting of Advent with instant gratification, we flatten the story. We diminish the courage it took to hope. We erase the fear, the sorrow, the risk. And when we refuse to see the pain, we cannot truly sense the depth of joy when it comes.

Joy that has not passed through darkness is thin.
Joy that has not wrestled with fear is fragile.

This is why we celebrate Advent. Advent is not Christmas. Advent is waiting. But Advent waiting is not passive but an *active expectation*.

We wait with hope, peace and love. And today —we wait with joy. Not a joy that ignores fear or denies suffering. Not a joy that pretends everything is fine.

But a joy that shows up *in the waiting*. A joy that leans forward toward God's promises even when the future feels fragile. A joy that moves. A joy that resists. A joy that takes root *before* fulfillment arrives.

Waiting—especially waiting with expectation – is at the very center of our faith. Because waiting exposes what we trust. Waiting reveals what we fear. Waiting shows us whether we believe God is still at work when we cannot yet see the outcome.

From the prophets of Israel to the mother of the Messiah, from exile to incarnation, God’s people are people who wait. Not because they have no choice. But because waiting is where faith is refined and joy is redefined. Waiting is where God does some of the deepest work within us. And waiting is where God meets us.

In the book of Micah, a pre-exilic prophet, we hear words spoken into a time of deep fear where everything seemed to be unraveling. The social fabric was tearing apart. Poverty was widespread. Corruption had become normal. Violence was expected. Even the leaders had lost their moral compass.

The options were bleak: Destruction by enemy invasion or exile into a foreign land.

And yet, amid dire warnings and impending darkness, Micah dared to speak of hope.

He spoke of a ruler who would come from Bethlehem. From a place too small to matter and too insignificant to impress. He spoke of restoration after exile. He spoke of a future where God gathers the scattered and tends the wounded. He spoke of a future that does not erase suffering but moves *through* it.

The people had to wait a very long time for this promise to be made flesh.

Centuries later, that ancient promise drew not in palaces, not in temples, not in armies—but in two unlikely bodies. Elizabeth and Mary

Both pregnant, both waiting for God’s promise to be fulfilled, both alive with joy knowing they were carrying children who would change the world. Yet the shadow of fear was not far. Mary’s and Elizabeth’s stories aren’t sweet and sentimentally sanitized stories. No. They are stories of risk.

Elizabeth was older, known as barren, and long resigned to disappointment. Her pregnancy was a miracle—it came late in life, long after she had given up waiting. Her first response was joy – “The LORD has taken away my disgrace among the people.” Her joy was real, but so was her vulnerability. Her pregnancy disrupted expectations. It raised questions. It invited scrutiny.

And so she withdrew into seclusion.

Joy, as we know, when it breaks the rules, often walks hand in hand with fear.

Mary’s situation was even more dangerous. Mary was very young, unmarried, thus was suddenly at risk. Her pregnancy threatened her reputation, her safety, her future. According to Matthew’s Gospel, it took divine intervention just to keep Joseph from abandoning her.

Mary did not go to Elizabeth out of sentimentality, but because she was in danger. She went for the protection that Elizabeth and Zechariah could give her. She went because she needed solidarity. She went because waiting alone was too heavy.

And yet—when Mary arrived at Elizabeth’s home, something extraordinary happened. Joy.

Elizabeth’s child leaped for joy within her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit. Mary sang.

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! ⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. ⁴⁸ He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored ⁴⁹ because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

⁵² He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵ just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

Mary rejoiced in what God had done for her, but she didn’t stop there. She did not pretend everything was fine. She did not romanticize her situation. When Mary sang the Magnificat, she sang as a woman who knew the cost of what she carried. Her song was not a lullaby to her unborn child. It was not gentle, not quiet and it wasn’t safe. Mary sang a revolution. She sang of joy shattering the darkness with its blazing light.

“With all my heart, I GLORIFY THE LORD!”

And then—she named what that joy meant.

Across the centuries her song of joy lifts the hearts of the oppressed and undergirds the determination of those hungering and thirsting for justice. Her song was God’s promise fulfilled in the little one she carried. In the man he would become – in the Christ, the Messiah, in the Emmanuel – God with Us.

She sang of proud hearts scattered. Of oppressive rulers pulled from thrones. Of the hungry filled and the rich sent away empty.

This is not the joy expressed on the inside of a Christmas card nor played in the best Hallmark Christmas movie.

This is joy that tells the truth. This is joy that refuses to be tamed by intimidation. This is joy that speaks directly to systems of power.

Mary knew what she sang and why she sang it. God’s promise fulfilled does not wait politely for permission. Emmanuel does not stay in the private sphere. God-with-us speaks truth to power. And the powerful will notice. Her joy was brave because joy that names injustice threatens those who benefit from it.

It is exactly the kind of song of joy that powerful people don’t want sung. Mary’s joy filled song did not and still does not comfort the comfortable. It destabilizes them. It imagines a world reordered and

power undone by mercy. This is why oppressive regimes silence poets and singers. Because songs shape imagination. And imagination shapes action.

What God was doing in her body reflected what God intended to do in the world. And Mary knew what it would cost. And still she said her courageous yes. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

The child Mary carried did not stay quietly in the manger.

He was born poor.

He lived without privilege.

He confronted religious systems.

He challenged economic exploitation.

He reached out the hand of God and brought healing and hope and mercy to the untouchables.

He proclaimed good news to the poor and trouble to the comfortable.

He was executed by the powerful.

And he overcame death.

This is what “God-With-Us” looks like.

Not God above us. Not God far away. But God in the middle of our mess. God with the marginalized. God with the displaced. God with those who are just waiting for that promise of God with us to be fulfilled.

In the season of Advent we wait. But we don’t wait silently nor passively because we know God keeps promises and is, was and will be already with us. To pause and listen, to hope, to even rejoice in anticipation of the Kingdom tolls the death knell of all that seeks to steal the light.

Therefore, like Mary and all the faithful who have waited before us:

We wait by practicing mercy.

We wait by lifting the lowly.

We wait by feeding the hungry.

We wait by refusing despair.

We wait by embodying the joy we long to see fulfilled.

We wait by embodying the joy we trust is coming.

We wait by telling the truth.

We wait by singing dangerous songs.

And we do it together. Joy grows in the waiting when we practice together. Joy multiplies when it is shared.

And that joy—active, courageous, costly joy—is the kind that changes the world.