



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Waiting for the Birth of Jesus

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 1:
46-55

Dec. 1, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

These words (today's scripture) were sung by a young Jewish woman 2,000 years ago, and they were just sung now. That's how long the word of our God shall stand— forever and forever. Waiting. Some of us, to be honest, are better at waiting than others. I understand. But that's what the season really is about. These four Sundays of Advent, we wait together.

Gina is one of my best friends. Her younger brother, Ben, was notorious in their household for not being a very good at waiting. Gina was 10 and Ben was eight. This was the first time she recalled the two of them deciding together that they were going to pool what money they had to buy their mother a Christmas present. They told their dad about this and he said, "Fine." And he took them to the mall. A few weeks earlier, Gina remembered that her mom had said, "Whenever I need an umbrella, I can't find one." And that lodged in Gina's mind. They went shopping for an umbrella and they found a lovely one, bright red, her mom's favorite color, and they paid for it with their own money. So proud.

They were driving back home and Gina turned to her 8-year-old little brother and said, "Ben, you can't say anything when we get home. You can't tell mom what it is." And Ben was like, "I know!" "No, listen, you are terrible at this. You can't tell her the secret. Not until Christmas, don't spoil it, Ben." And Ben's said, "I know, I'm fine." They get into the kitchen off the garage and their mom is making dinner. She turns around and asks innocently, "So where have you all been?" Gina looks over at Ben and he is doing that little kid dance, which means either 'I have to go to the bathroom' or 'I'm going to say something that I shouldn't right now.' In that split second, Ben blurts out, "It's an umbrella!" Gina looked at him and said, "Ben, can't you wait? Can't you wait?!" Some of us are better than others at waiting.

There's been some research about this—especially about how we drive, when we drive, how patient we are, and how aggressive we are. The AAA, the American Automobile Association, launched this research a few years ago. It looks at the 60 largest municipalities across the country to see how patient we are. And what they did was they put people at intersections with stoplights and they waited until the stoplight turned green and then they counted how long it took before the car behind them honked. That was a measure of patience.

You can predict that the least patient part of the country was New York City, northern New Jersey, Jersey City, and Hoboken. Their research said that the light hadn't even turned green and people were already honking. Los Angeles came in second, and third was Philadelphia. Fourth was Sacramento, California. Fifth was Houston, sixth was Miami. Kansas City? We were 27th, right in the middle of the 60. Kind of typical for us in the Midwest. Denver and St. Louis were #25 and #26. Portland, Oregon was 28th. Minneapolis-St. Paul was 29th in the nation. Wichita, Kansas turned out to be the most patient place in the nation among drivers—the best at waiting.

Three times in their research, the researcher was at the light, it turned green, and the person behind them let the green stand, go to yellow and then red. And they still didn't honk! In fact, three times, the person behind them got out of the car, came up and said, "Excuse me, are you okay? I just want to check and make sure you're okay." That's incredible in this day and age. So those of you in Wichita, you wait better than the rest of us.

I think the mother of our Lord, Mary, knew something about waiting. What you just heard sung beautifully is the Magnificat (Latin for 'my soul magnifies the Lord'). It's the first line of her song—the most famous song in all of scripture. But to get there,

I want to remember with you; how we got to the point of Mary singing.

It starts with the angel Gabriel, who is always the messenger. He appears to a priest named Zacharia. Zacharia is older. He and Elizabeth aren't able to have children. Elizabeth calls her barrenness her shame. In the ancient world, the key purpose of a woman is to get married and have children. So when that doesn't happen, they heap shame upon themselves. The whole community often heaps shame on them as well. Some of you know the pain of not being able to bear children. In the ancient world, it was even more so. Angel Gabriel appears to the priest Zacharia and says, "Even though you are old, Elizabeth is going to have a child." Zechariah is skeptical. He is punished by being struck mute. He doesn't get to speak until his son, John, the Baptizer is born.

The cousin of Elizabeth is Mary, the mother of our Lord. Mary lives in Nazareth. Archeologists say that at the time of Jesus, Nazareth had about a population of 400 or so—a small community, poor, mostly agrarian. Mary is a teenager. At 13 is her bat mitzvah and she becomes an adult woman. By 14, they're usually engaged and by 15, often married. Most Bible scholars think Mary is 14 or 15 years old. She's engaged to Joseph, who is a carpenter in a small community doing his best to find work. No one is rich in Nazareth. Some believe that Joseph may have been a widower. Here's an older man who gets to marry a second time. And then Gabriel, the messenger angel, appears to Mary in Nazareth, and says, "Do not be afraid for you are going to bear a child."

Mary's first response to the angel is, "How can this be? I'm not even married yet. I'm still a virgin." And the angel Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and do not doubt this, Mary, for everything is possible with God." Her response is remarkable to me. Her response back to Gabriel is, "Blessed be God who has chosen this lowly servant. For I am the servant of God."

Amy-Jill Levine, a Bible scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School, says, the better translation is not 'servant,' but 'slave' of God. The Greek word means 'slave.' In response to the news, Mary says, "I am the slave of God. Blessed be God, for God has chosen

me. So let it be according to your word." I find that fantastic because according to the law in Deuteronomy 22, if an unwed young woman becomes pregnant, that brings shame to the entire town. And the response is to take the girl and place her in the doorway of her father's house and the men of the village will stone her to death. Every Jewish girl knew this. Mary for certain knew this and that's why she says first, "How can this be? I am not yet married." But through her courage, she later says, "Let this be. I am a slave of God. Let this be according to God's word."

As Mary leaves Nazareth, I bet she is thinking all kinds of things. How will I tell Joseph? What will he say? What will my folks say? She makes her way to see her cousin Elizabeth because the angel Gabriel told her that Elizabeth is also with child. When she enters into Elizabeth and Zacharia's house, the baby growing in Elizabeth leaps. As soon as the baby hears Mary's voice, Elizabeth says, "Oh, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child who is to be born from you." And that's when Mary sings. That's when this terrified teenager sings.

It stuns me that she has the audacity and strength and the courage to sing. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God. Who is my Savior for God. The mighty one has done incredible things. Surely generations to come will call me blessed." Oh, magnify the Lord. Oh, praise the Lord. I'm astounded by her courage and strength. This was not an easy position for this young woman to be in—an unwed teenage mother, but she has the courage to sing.

What she sings about is who Jesus will be eventually. That Jesus will be the one who will give food to the hungry, who will take the proud and make them lowly, and who will send the rich away empty handed. She sings about the coming of the reign of God. How she knows that I do not know, but surely that is the Holy Spirit in her.

Friends, as we wait for Jesus to be born again, whatever we're carrying with us—whatever fears, anxieties, worries—I pray with you that we would have the courage of Mary, that we would be able to sing. I invite us to sing: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, born to set all of God's people free, friends. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.