

What do we know about waiting...except that we don't like waiting. We've been in 'anticipation mode' for weeks now. Plans have been made, abandoned and re-formed. Traditions have been honoured; we've (grudgingly) made room for disappointments; grief has intruded, and all the while, we wait.

Clergy who favour the traditional church calendar have grown accustomed to hearing from folks who are...seasonally confused. (how many of you have wondered – quietly or aloud – about the lack of Christmas hymns...?) Because the Christmas machine is in high gear – and has been for weeks. The lights – the plans – the concerts and pageants – all of those are done and dusted. Our preparations are (mostly) well made...and still, the moment can't come soon enough. We are tired of waiting. But if I may offer a word (or two) in favour of anticipation.

The stories that define the coming Christmas season for us are stories of anticipation. Two separate women receive divine announcements. Pregnancies are built around anticipation, and we have all experienced the shifting emotions through nine months of wondering, worrying and waiting. This is what Mary can teach us. She accepts her condition as a fact of life. She hears and ponders the divine pronouncements. And then she turns her attention to the waiting.

She seeks comfort – and perhaps advice – from an elderly relative who, wouldn't you know it, shares her condition; and these two women – generations apart and bound together – would teach us how to wait.

Patient, as only expectant mothers can be. Grace-full (perhaps not physically, but filled with a sense of acceptance and wonder.) Acceptance – in this case – does not mean resignation. Acceptance is what happens as a pregnancy develops. The reality of the thing ‘grows on you’ (if you’ll pardon the expression) and most women (and occasionally their partners) capture a sense of growing acceptance of a thing that will happen. The waiting, being necessary, becomes the thing that helps form us and prepare us for the thing we’re waiting for.

Mary does a lot of pondering during her time of waiting. It’s a great word – as someone noted in our last Bible study – a word full of the weight of waiting. And it seems that at the beginning of her pregnancy, she is assured by the words of the heavenly visitor: “For nothing will be impossible with God.’ And maybe these are words that can inform our various seasons of waiting.

Because what we learn after we outgrow the kind of waiting that was informed by the good old “Christmas Wish-book’ that was once the feature of our December reading is that waiting sometimes leads to disappointment. Waiting can be dreadful - and full of fear.

These two expectant mothers know what that is like too. It would have been easy for them to wait in fear. The survival of neither newborns nor their mothers was not a sure thing in those days. Times were hard - and conditions were...well not unlike they are right now in the region: volatile, primitive - no reliable health care - in short, perilous. Both Mary and Elizabeth could have chosen to wait in isolation - fearful and full of doubt.

The outcome was not guaranteed...except that they had heard and believed a divine promise.

It seems like a reliable 'Sunday morning' answer to otherwise complicated problems, but our waiting is made (both easier and more productive) if it is balanced by God's activity rather than our idleness.

Waiting born of idleness is challenging and occasionally destructive. That idleness comes from our fears - sure that only trouble lurks at the end of our waiting. The fear that comes from forgetting that we have a community of faithfulness to help us through our experience. That community is full of folks who have learned what waiting can be like. And each of them has a different story of how God moved in the midst of their anticipation - soothing fears, and helping to illuminate the path ahead. Learning from others - as Mary and Elizabeth learned from each other - this is the gift that the story gives us.

The art of waiting with an awareness of the constant activity of God – the constant energy of the Holy Spirit – waiting while that which shall soon be born tumbles and kicks and dances inside us – this is the goal of our faithful waiting. It is the waiting of our childhood Christmases – electric and sleepless and full of delight.

It is the waiting of all who would follow Jesus. Waiting for our prayers to become actions, for our actions to become justice, and our justice to reveal God's mercy, grace and love.