

For the people of St. Philip's
Year A , Advent IV
December 23, 2007
Matthew 1: 18-25
Maria Hoecker, preacher

As many of you know, I spent the several days prior to Advent on a retreat in a hermitage in Sewanee, TN. I spent part of that time in silence at St. Mary's Convent. The Hermitage was formerly the sacristy of the convent church, but the church has since been torn down. The one room structure is perched on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau over looking a valley 800 ft. below. . It was there, in the quiet beauty of the Tennessee woods in late November, where the fog cloaks the hillside, that I pondered all it is for which I'm waiting.

My first few days, I found myself waiting for the sun to come up; waiting for the wood to catch fire in the cast iron stove next to my bed; I waited for the sun to reach its midpoint when I knew it would be time for a cup of tea, I waited for dusk as it was my favorite time of day to go for a long walk toward the library where I could catch a glimpse of the setting sun.. It took about a day, but as my body settled into the silence, I began to notice the slant of light through the trees, the rustle of fallen leaves outside the window, the taste of Earl Gray at noontime, for a few days I stopped molding my present around future events. That is, I started living in the moment — unplanned. I got up for no particular reason, napped when I felt like it, and walked with no planned destination. I was still waiting, but I was resting within the wait . Time deepened for me in those few days. I felt like I was away for much longer than I was.

It seems a counter-cultural paradox that the church has chosen to commemorate most of December in a separate liturgical season. *Adventus* means “coming” in Latin, and the propers for it are all about anticipation: A voice cries out in the wilderness to prepare a way, Make a straight path, the Lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them. In the anticipation, we deepen the time of waiting. This Sunday — Advent 4 — we're getting close to the payoff, in a couple of days we will celebrate Christmas. (Crittendon)

For this Sunday, we see in the gospel reading, Matthew's interest in proving Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture. Throughout the 28 chapters of his gospel, Matthew reminds us again and again how the baby born in Bethlehem is the son of David, the son of Abraham. He tells us, again and again, how such and such happened to fulfill scripture. At the beginning of Matthew, we have genealogy: Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, fourteen from Babylon to the Messiah. Lots and lots of waiting.

And then verse 18: “now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” In an essay written on this reading by Lindsey Crittenden , she observes that we can hear an editorial edge in this statement, a need to explain how Jesus' birth took place “in this way.” Don't births all take place in basically the same way? But this isn't any birth, this wasn't any conception. Matthew goes on to tell of an announcement by an angel of the Lord: not the annunciation to Mary, so beautifully told in Luke's gospel, but the tale told to Joseph, just as that good man has resolved to “dismiss Mary quietly.” What else might he do when his fiancé finds herself with child? He is a righteous man.

The story — the 42 generations — gets interesting now. It's not just a list of names, sprinkled a few times with those of women (and not just any women, but Rahab, Ruth, Tamar, and Mary, women of “scandalous or unusual sexual union,” as one text puts it* — that is, a prostitute-turned-spy, a foreigner, a rape victim, an unwed pregnant teen).

It's a story now, a fascinating one, a human one. An unmarried, unwed maiden; a betrothed man; and an angel who appears and tells him to do right by her. “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive
And bear a son,
And they shall name him
Emmanuel.”

Joseph did right by Mary. And that had to be in some ways as terrifying, as trusting, as transformative, as Mary's acceptance of the message given to her. Who knows what angels will say, and when and how? Who knows how we will respond? Can we do so with love and openness of heart?

Growing up, I didn't know that Advent was its own season. At least I don't remember it. There are a number of wonderful traditions that families live out. Our particular tradition is that we try to observe Advent as a season in which to simplify our life. Because we are home for the holidays, we wait until the fourth Sunday of Advent (today) to buy and decorate our freshly cut tree. We keep an Advent wreath on the dining room table, and even though the presents are piling up, we don't put them out until this day, the fourth Sunday of Advent. Sometimes I wonder if I'm being too austere. But my daughter surprised me a few nights ago. We were on the sofa snuggled under a blanket in front of the fire, Grandma had arrived from Kansas, a cat was curled up in Chloe's lap. Max was dancing to music. We had eaten a simple supper of soup and crackers. "I just love Christmas time," Chloe said. Her quiet comment surprised me because we don't have any decorations up yet. I haven't baked a thing, nor wrapped a gift,—there are no twinkling lights in our house yet. But we all know it's coming, and we're ready for it, we've been waiting. Our hearts were gathered around the hearth that evening and in that deep moment it was enough, our joy was deep in that moment.

Here at the church we all do something similar. We have our Advent wreath and candles and we refrain from pulling out the decorations until after services on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Our hearts are gathered here together and it is enough. The Hanging of the Greens will come this afternoon. Both at home and here, once we move through this day, out come the ornaments and the baubles and the Christmas songs — and up they stay for all twelve days of Christmas. With it comes a sweet release from all the waiting. Christmastide will draw to a close on Epiphany, January 6 when we welcome the Magi- and welcome the Light of Christ that has been reborn into our lives. We will resolve yet again, to take that light out into a dark world. What a glorious season it is, shining in the bleak mid-winter.

Yet, Christmas day can still feel heavy with sadness for many of us. For many in our society, this season with its imposed good cheer and parties and consumerism can be a time of quiet despair and debt. Or holiday traditions can radically change from one year to the next when loved ones die or move away. There are many faces absent who once were gathered around our family Christmas dinner table—even as new ones have come along. If one lives long enough this happens to us all. We've all experienced some loss, and old traditions have died along with the people who installed them. Parties come and go, as people come and go. Only love can endure the passing of the seasons. The birth of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel-God Is With Us, brought God's most profound promise into our lives. *Love Endures.*

We're waiting, but that doesn't mean we have given up.

Waiting is more than time served for delayed gratification.

Waiting does not grant permission for passivity.

Waiting is not joyless.

Waiting can be both delicious and austere, a pleasure and a gift unto itself.

Waiting deepens our moments in time.

In the deep time of anticipation, we keep on living.

How we live in the moment matters —as we wait, we discover each other anew; with great thanksgiving; and then we can gladly move into a love shared between us. It is an enduring love, so simple that only a tiny child in Christ could have shown it to us.

Amen.

* From Education for Ministry text, year two, copyright 1977, fourth edition revised 2000. The University of the South.

* Lindsey Crittenden, the author of [*The Water Will Hold You; A Skeptic Learns to Pray*](#) (Harmony Books, 2007)