

FGBC: Advent 2019: Waiting Well

Luke 1:30-52

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What does waiting do to you? Have you ever found the short line at Superstore only to learn that the person in front of you has been playing the I-found-all-the-items-without-price tags game – yeah? The till guy has to call a lifeline. But you're like "Hey, I've got nowhere to be, it's just so great to have a moment of calm in my day." Anyone? What does waiting do to you?

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The reality is we all have periods of time when we are between tasks and waiting – waiting at red lights, waiting in drive-throughs. But even more than that most people spend their lives waiting. My kids are waiting for Christmas. Teenagers can't wait to get out of high school. Then we are waiting to finish college, waiting to get a job, waiting to get promoted, waiting for the weekend, waiting to retire, waiting to die. We are a waiting people. And so one of the most important questions in life becomes: do you wait well?

I'm not sure if you've every done this exercise, but while I was in university I was challenged to make a pie graph with how I was spending my time. And I thought "I'm too busy for that", but I did it anyway. And I found something shocking.

There are 168 hours in a week. I sleep about 7 hours a night so that's a third of my life up in dreams right there. Then I was a full-time student so that was 15 hours a week which averages out to 2 and a bit hours a day. Homework was another 2.5 hours or so. Then I worked 30 hours a week, so that was 4.3 hours a day. I also attended church, went to Bible study, was on the music team and did an internship – 10 hours a week. On top of that I ate, showered and brushed my teeth for about 2 hours a day. Which amazingly left around 30 hours a week, over 4 hours a day, totally unaccounted for - wasted. Waiting without purpose for the next thing to begin. And I wasn't even aware this time was slipping through my fingers.

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In Mark 13 Jesus tells His disciples He is coming back. And He says to them:

No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son Himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!" (Mark 13:32-33)

So people who follow Jesus seek to wait well. And of course, waiting well means way more than simply not having any wasted time in your day. It means using all your time to move in the right direction. We are going to look at someone who lived this kind of life today. And what we are going to see is that waiting well is within reach for all of us, and is evidence that God is at work in your life.

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Alright, please turn to Luke chapter 1. We are going to look at Mary who was a very unique person in scripture. Of course she becomes God's mom, which is pretty unique. But she is also someone who worked hard to not waste her waiting. And she wrote a song about this.¹

Now Mary's right in the middle of the greatest event in human history. And she's a poor young girl – probably somewhere between 13-16 (because that's how old women were when they got married during this time).

And she's a God-loving girl who is waiting for the day when the Messiah was going to come and get rid of those pesky Romans who were oppressing the nation. That's what everyone thought.

And then one day as she's doing laundry and planning her wedding an angel shows up. So look at verse 30

[Read Luke 1:30-33]

Wow! A peasant girl is going to have a baby who will be the Eternal King.

Now Mary's young but she knows about the birds and the bees. And so she asks "How is this going to happen because I'm a virgin?" And the angel replies matter-of-factly: "Don't worry. The Holy Spirit is going to do this. Nothing's impossible for God." I'm not sure how you would respond to that. But Mary's response sets her apart.

So just a few months earlier Zechariah and Elizabeth encountered the same angel who gave a similar message, but they responded differently. And Zechariah spent 9 months mute as a result – perhaps to Elizabeth's joy, we don't know. But hear this, they weren't wicked people. Listen to how Luke describes them:

When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah... his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. (Luke 1:5-7)

So what we know about these guys is they had spent their lives serving God. They were righteous, obedient and mature. And yet when Gabriel shows up and tells them their prayers have been answered and what they were waiting for was going to happen Zechariah is full of doubt. He can't believe God will do something different than He's done before. This is waiting poorly.

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¹ Outline adapted from Jamin Roller <https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/waiting-well> (Accessed December 13, 2019)

Is there anything broken in your life right now that you've grown comfortable with such that you resist change, even for the better? Just showing up and being obedient for years isn't what God wants from us. He wants us to follow His lead even into the unknown. And this is what we get with Mary. God's at work in her and the result is that she is ready to wait well even when things don't go her way. Look what she sings – verse 46:

[Read Luke 1:46-49]

This is an astounding response if you think of where Mary's at in this moment. Nothing the angel has said lines up with any of her plans. She's a young girl. She's engaged to be married. And Joseph's going to know this baby isn't his. There are a thousand ways this can go wrong. There are a thousand things to be worried about. It would be so easy to be negative. But she responds by singing "I'm God's servant."

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Now here's what she's saying with these words. She's saying "God, my life is Yours. What I've got is Yours. I'm about waiting for Your kingdom to come, and I'm about participating in Your will being done. And so even though what You are bringing into my life is totally different than everything I've got planned I choose not to be afraid about what I might lose. I choose to trust You."

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When God brings the unexpected into your life how do you respond? Obviously no one is happy to be caught off guard. But do you lean in to trust God, or do you immediately begin to worry about what you might lose?

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Mary's singing a song here, but imagine it was a song of fear about what she had to lose. It would probably sound a little less like a Christmas song and a lot more like country – right? But Mary's song isn't about fear or loss, it's about faith. And so she starts off saying "I am God's servant. I'm about You. Everything I've got is yours." She doesn't haven anything to lose, it's all God's. That's why she's not afraid.

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Now here's something I find interesting: when we are in charge of our lives then the things we have exist to serve us, and we end up worrying about losing what we have.

In Matthew we get a character like that – Herod. Herod's a man who was in charge of his own life. And so he built his kingdom on violence and oppression, living terrified of the day he might lose it all. And this led to some poor choices.

Once Caesar Augustus called a meeting with Herod, and Herod was worried it might go bad so he ordered his wife executed while he was gone because he couldn't stand the thought of her remarrying if anything happened to him. When you are god in your own life instead of God's servant, you're the only one in charge of protecting what you have. And friends, we all make pathetic gods.

Later Herod had his three oldest sons killed because he was worried they were going to take his throne while he was still living. And then one day some wise men showed up following a star and looking for some baby King of the Jews and Herod lost it again.

He was so afraid of losing what he had that he ordered his army to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem – probably 20 or so. In the end history tells us “Herod died in Jericho unlamented by his family.”²

Here’s a guy who had everything but because he set himself up as the protector of all he had he ended up destroying it all and missing eternity in the process. That’s how to wait poorly.

But opposite to this, in the midst of events totally outside her plans, Mary sings: “God, I’m Your servant. What I’ve got is Yours. My eyes are on You.” This is waiting well.

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She also says “God is my Saviour. He’s my Lord. He’s been so mindful of me that everyone is going to call me blessed.”

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If you’re a Jesus follower verse 49 is the foundational statement of your life – God has done great things for me. God’s given me meaning. God’s given me purpose. He looked on me when I was stubbornly committed to my addicted, rebellious, sinful mess, and He loved me. I’m blessed because God has done great things for me that I didn’t deserve.

When we live this way – I am who I am because of what God has done for me – we wait well. But sometimes this gets twisted in circles like ours. Sometimes we can fall into thinking “I am who I am because I’ve managed to climb above the masses, and now I’m doing great things for God.”

But when this happens we trade being a sinner saved by grace, to be a superstar. But here’s the problem, we’re not that awesome. Sometimes we think we are because we compare ourselves with people who are even less awesome – that’s a classic human trick – have you done that? I’m not perfect, but at least I’m better than that guy!

The problem is the standard for awesomeness isn’t the poor mess across the isle – it’s Jesus. How awesome are you compared to Him? But if we leave that out of the equation it’s easy to trick ourselves into believing we are better than we actually are.

So have you ever invited guests over and spent just as much time cleaning the house as you did hanging out with them?

² Vermes, Geza “Who’s Who in the Age of Jesus” (New York, Penguin Books), 2005. Pg 150

Why do we do that? It's because we don't want other people to see the garbage we actually live in. We want them to think we live like we should. And so we get down on our hands and knees and scrub the oatmeal off the floor and pull out all the unchipped plates at the back of the shelf – at least that's what happens at our house. And we have a great visit, but sooner or later the guests leave and we have to let our kids out of the basement where we had them locked up. Then we go on living until the next time we have guests over.

Why do we do that? It's because our value comes from what people think of us and who we imagine we should be instead of what God has done for us. We think: "I need to appear clean. People can't find out I'm a weak sinner." So I tidy up, I hide my garbage and I pretend to be who I think I should be.

And when we do this we end up singing "I'm valuable because I'm put together, and God's lucky to have me on His team."

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But friends, that person doesn't exist. The you, you are supposed to be, doesn't exist. And so any value you receive from pretending to be that person is totally false and totally anti-Christian.

You see Jesus came to save sinners. And so the only song Jesus-followers can ever sing is "God, you've done great things for me that I didn't deserve." Now that might sound depressed – you certainly can't find this logic in any self-help book – but here's the crazy thing: When we sing this song we don't have to worry about being found out or exposed because we are claiming to be sinners saved by grace. And if you look honestly at your life you will realize that's the only hope you've got. You really aren't helpful to God at all!

But Christianity says living in the truth doesn't lead to depression, Jesus says "The truth will set you free." Here's why:

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My children are among the most valuable people in the world to me. And it's not because they help around the house or with the budget. They are terrible at shoveling the driveway. They are the ones who put the oatmeal on the floor. And they break everything I own. But they are valuable to me because they bear my image. And no matter how badly they perform that never changes.

Friends it is in this same way that God loves us. And so it's great news that He doesn't love us because we're awesome. He's our Saviour and He has done great things for us that we've done nothing to deserve. Amen? This is the song Mary sings.

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But Mary isn't just thinking about what God has done for her. She knows the story's not about her, God's doing something big. Look at verse 50.

[Read Luke 1:50-55]

Mary is enraptured by how God offers His great plan to reverse the curse to all humanity. This is what Mary sees.

Now Mary's not living in a bubble of blessing where nothing ever goes wrong. She's living in a world just as broken as ours. And she is one of the vulnerable ones. She's a pregnant, unwed peasant girl. She's not on the road to upward mobility. She can't go to college to get a better job. Her future is fixed.

But instead of bemoaning her troubles, instead of worrying about what she might lose or pretending she is better than she actually is, she focuses on what God's doing. He's the hero of her story.

And so she sings of how God brings down rulers and elevates the humble. She sings of God's work to scatter the proud and send rich abusers away hungry. And she sings this even though it's bigger than her story.

Friends, I've got to say it again, Mary is an unwed, pregnant peasant girl – things don't look good! And yet, instead of focusing on what her parents are going to say or the uncertainty of her future with Joseph, she sees the pattern of reversal in God's economy. Life's bigger than her! God is the hero of history. He's working out His plans to elevate the humble and humble the proud.

So the Herods of the world will be brought low, and the Marys of the world will be lifted up. Jesus says:

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for Him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs....

God blesses those who are humble,
for they will inherit the whole earth....

God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. (Matthew 5:3-10)

God's economy is full of reversal, but in the moment you need eyes of faith to see this. It's easy, 2000 years later, to see Mary comes out on top. Everyone does call her blessed, and no one cares about Herod. But that wasn't obvious in the moment.

Mary gave birth in a barn. Then she spent a few years running for her life. She was never anything but poor. Her husband died when her kids were young. And then her oldest son got crucified. So it was never roses and sugar-plumbs. But Mary saw past all this to what was actually true. And she's right, she, and all those who fear God from generation to generation are living in the midst of God's great reversal. God is recreating what sin broke; He is making all things new. But it's an already and a not-yet reversal. We talked about this two weeks ago: Some has happening already, and some will only happen when Christ returns.

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And this is what Christmas is about. The city is decorated with lights that are piercing the darkness. People who don't even know anything about Christ are proclaiming the hope that one day what is broken will be healed, and what is hidden in darkness will be made right.

And many of us have tasted this reversal already. We know that God has done great things for us that we don't deserve. We've been saved out of brokenness. And so we joyfully submit ourselves to Him as His servants.

And we do this even though it's still dark outside. It's certainly dark in our world and there is still lots of darkness in a lot of our lives. There are things going on in our families and workplaces and our bodies that are broken and painful. And so we are still hungry for the day when Jesus will return and make all things new.

But until then we are left with a choice, we can focus on the brokenness and grow to be cantankerous grouches who see the problem in everything – I think we all know people who have taken that route. Some of us have become those people. But we don't have to be. We can look out with eyes of faith and tell God's story. Truly "His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation." And this is the path Mary chose.

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So friends, are you waiting well?

We are destined to experience both periods of joy and trouble in our lives, but the choice to how to respond to these experiences is ours. And the call of Mary is to allow the Holy Spirit to catch us up in God's story instead of being consumed by our own. And that's what we are invited into in seasons like Advent. And really that's what we do here at church all the time.

Church is the place where sinners are empowered by our Father, who loves us because we bear His image, to commit ourselves to Him as servants, acknowledging that He is our Saviour, and that all of this is His story not ours. And it's when we commit ourselves to living this that we are enabled to wait well.

So brothers and sisters, each of us have only the days He has allotted left, so use all your time to move in His direction. Wait well.