

December 24, 2006
Sermon
Luke 1:39-55

Waiting

Let us pray

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight Oh God, My strength and my redeemer.

Waiting is such a loathsome task. It is particularly at this time of year that I find my patience waning and I feel like the E string on a violin, which is wound so tight that it is no longer produces the harmonious note of E but that of an F sharpe, which is a particularly grating and anxiety producing sound and out of context with the tuning of a violin. I often feel that I am wound so tight that I will snap. I'm sure many of you have stood in long lines at the grocery store and while Christmas shopping at the local mall, and there is always the person in front of you who has forgotten something, can't find his or her wallet or insists on talking to the cashier about his or her Christmas plans and all the

relatives who will be visiting. Then there are the always the unavoidable dilemmas of travel; waiting for the public transportation, waiting at the airline terminal, or, while driving your car, sitting in traffic watching your gas gauge move toward empty, along with your wallet. These are the experiences of waiting that are becoming all too common in our society and that test our patience.

I speak of these negative experiences of waiting because it is so easy to be caught up in these experiences that we may lose sight of the experience of waiting as a sacred and meaningful time. The opening scene of the Gospel of Luke is filled with waiting people. Zachariah and Elizabeth are waiting, the crowd is waiting, Mary is waiting, and Elizabeth and Mary are waiting together. Let us turn to the Gospel of Luke to see what it is that they are waiting for and how they respond to waiting.

Our Scripture passage today is preceded by two separate but parallel birth announcements. The first birth announcement involves the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Zechariah, a

priest in the temple, and his wife Elizabeth, who was the daughter of a priest, would have been considered people of high station in their community. They are described as a devout couple who had been childless. Elizabeth had been barren and now Elizabeth was beyond childbearing age. This must have been a great sorrow to the couple, not only for personal reasons but also for societal concerns. The bearing of children was considered a great blessing in Biblical times, as it is today. In the time of Zachariah and Elizabeth it was essential to have a child to carry on the family name, thus perpetuating God's covenant with Israel. It was also essential to have someone to care for you in your old age. Barrenness was regarded as a tragedy, a disgrace, and even a sign of God's punishment. One can only imagine the sorrow that Elizabeth and Zachariah must have felt.

You may remember the story. Zachariah is in the temple at the hour of the sacrifice, he is at the pinnacle of his life of priestly service. The people were outside praying and waiting for Zachariah to come forth from the sanctuary. An angel of the Lord

appeared on the right side of the altar and from Zachariah's initial response we know that he was terrified. The angel's words were, "Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." Zachariah makes the mistake of questioning the angel. The angel replies, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you do not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary." Elizabeth did conceive and Zachariah remained speechless. So here we have a high priest, a person of standing in the community, and he has lost his voice because his faith was not strong.

The birth announcement that follows this is the one that we all know. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and says to her, "Do

not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." The angel tells Mary that her relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son and that, "this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And now Mary, the one of lowly birth, finds her voice and speaks to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This now brings us to our Scripture passage this morning when Mary visits Elizabeth. The passage opens by Mary hastening to the house of Zechariah to see Elizabeth. It is interesting that when the angel came to Mary she was only told that Elizabeth would conceive a child, she was not told to go to Elizabeth. One can only imagine that it is the sharing of the joy and wonder of carrying a child that brings these two women together. When Mary greets Elizabeth not only does the child leap within Elizabeth's womb, but also Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins to prophesy. There is no indication that Elizabeth knew of the

encounter between the angel and Mary. The implication is that the knowledge of Mary's pregnancy came to Elizabeth through the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth does not confer a blessing upon Mary, she realizes that Mary is already blessed. She is so moved that in a loud cry she says, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." The angel had promised Zachariah that he would have joy, and now joy has come to Elizabeth and Zachariah through the child that Elizabeth carries and the visitation of Mary. The promise has been fulfilled.

Elizabeth's prophetic words are matched by the song of praise by Mary in the song that we recognize as the Magnificat. And now, once again, the one from lowly birth finds her voice and says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Identifying Mary with the lowly foreshadows both the promise of the raising up of the lowly and the fulfillment of this

promise in the ministry of Jesus. In the words that follow the proud are scattered and the powerful are deposed, in contrast, the lowly are exalted and the hungry are fed while the rich are sent away empty. The overthrow of the powerful does not come about through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion, but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child.

So it is that these two women wait and Zachariah waits. They wait actively, not passively; they wait in anticipation and with joy and wonder not in anxiety and agitation. In Henri Nouwen's reflection entitled "Waiting for God" he writes about Zachariah, Mary and Elizabeth. Nouwen writes, "Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. "Zachariah, your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son." "Mary, listen! You are to conceive and bear a son". People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from

nothing to something. I It is always a movement from something to something more. Zachariah, Mary, and Elizabeth were living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them."... "Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be fully present in the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it."

We are living with a promise, the promise of God's covenant with us, a covenant of salvation through the birth of a child who came into the world to show us the way. The seed has been planted and now we are waiting. Let us wait, not with impatience and anxiety, but with joy and anticipation for the message of Christ to be fulfilled in our lives and in our world.

The visit between Mary and Elizabeth is a model for us of what it means to be a community waiting together, that is united in joy and anticipation. The joy of Mary and Elizabeth is the joy of all who look forward with wonder and thankfulness to the birth of a child. Joy is peaked by waiting. Love is disclosed in tenderness and promise. Every birth can be a sign of salvation, of finding favor, of being blessed, of living with promise, and of realizing its fulfillment. So, may we find hope on this day, as we wait in anticipation and joy for the living message of Christ to be fulfilled in our world.