

Waiting for the Messiah

Meditations on the perspectives of the characters in the infancy narratives

Introduction

A common theme of Advent reflections is waiting. Each year, we are called to remember that these busy weeks leading up to the Nativity are not just a time of preparation for festivities, but, more importantly, a time of anticipation of the Messiah's coming. We remember the wonder of God coming to us as a helpless human infant (so well represented for us by our spiritual father, St. Francis) and we anticipate his return at the end of time. So, in anticipating our annual celebration of the great mystery of 2000+ years ago, we also emulate those found in the short infancy narratives in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. All of them were waiting for the Messiah, in one way or another. By considering and reflecting on what might have been going through their minds during that time, we can take the familiar words of the Christmas stories and perhaps hear them in a fresh way. Whatever the experience brings, may we all be filled with the wonder of the Incarnation this Christmas and always.

Zechariah

Meditation

As a priest, of course I knew the prophecies about the Messiah. Just as Elizabeth and I had given up on our hopes of ever having a child, I had no hope for the Messiah coming in my lifetime. Even so, it wasn't too smart for me to doubt the angel Gabriel when he told me that we would have a son who would be the precursor to the Messiah. I got what I deserved when I couldn't talk for nine months! THAT was a LONG wait! It's good that I had been able to let Elizabeth know that the boy's name was to be John. I don't know how long I would have been mute if we hadn't named him correctly!

Gospel

[The angel said to him, "John] will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah
to turn their hearts toward their children
and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous,
to prepare a people fit for the Lord. [Luke 15b-17]

Prayer

Heavenly father, help us to trust in you, even when human wisdom says all is lost. Amen.

Elizabeth

Meditation

I wasn't thinking about the Messiah. Why would I? I believed the prophecies, but that doesn't mean it would have any effect on my own life. Then Zechariah came home from the temple mute. I didn't understand, but soon I realized that our years and years of prayers had been answered: I was pregnant! What a shock at our age! Then my young cousin Mary showed up unexpectedly, and the thrill I got when I heard her voice was matched by the huge leap my baby made. Could it be? Could my child be the one who prepares the way for the Lord? From then on, I was waiting not only for my baby, but for the birth of Mary's boy, my Lord.

Gospel

[Elizabeth] cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." [Luke 1:42,46]

Prayer

Father, may we be filled with the Holy Spirit and see your work in our lives and the lives of those around us. Amen.

John the Baptist

Meditation

How many people get to anticipate someone else's birth while they're still in their mother's womb? Maybe twins can have some connection like that, but I don't know of any other case like mine. The first thing I remember is sensing a light in the darkness, and wanting to reach the light. My attempt to reach the light must be the leap my mother felt.

Once I became a man, I was waiting for the Messiah all over again. I had to help as many people as possible be ready for him when He chose to reveal himself.

Gospel

And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God
by which the daybreak from on high will visit us
to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow,
to guide our feet into the path of peace." [Luke 1: 76-79]

Prayer

Father, may we too be light to guide others to you. Amen.

Angel Gabriel

Meditation

Angels are part of God's time, not human time, so waiting is different for us. But when God sent me to Mary to ask her to freely agree to be the mother of the Messiah...the mother of God...I think I had a little sense of what human waiting and anticipation is like. I was present at a pivotal moment in the relationship between God and human beings! Sometimes it's great to be a messenger.

Gospel

[T]he angel [Gabriel] said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. [Luke 1:30-33,38]

Prayer

Father, may we, too, be messengers of your goodness and love in our world. Amen.

Mary

Meditation

Of course, there's no way I would have thought that the Messiah would be born of THIS virgin! Why me, I wondered. I certainly wasn't going to say no to the God of all creation, even though I wondered what was going to happen...and especially how I was going to explain this to dear Joseph. My waiting was the most personal of any – the waiting that any mother goes through as the new life grows in her womb. But it was also a waiting in wonderment – how could this be? What does it mean for my son to be the Messiah, the savior of the world?

Gospel

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." [Luke 1:26b-28]

Prayer

Jesus, help us to know that you are with us as surely as you were present with Mary, in Word and sacrament. Amen.

Joseph

Meditation

As a descendant of David, of course I knew the prophecy that the Messiah would come from David's lineage. My branch of the family wasn't very significant, and I saw no sign that the Messiah was part of my generation, nor of the next. There was no one who seemed unusually powerful and charismatic, as surely such a leader would be. Then Mary raced off to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who, amazingly, was pregnant after all these years of trying...and when she came back, my betrothed wife told me that she, too, was pregnant! Since I was going to honor the promise of virginity she told me she'd made, and we weren't living together yet anyway, of course I was shocked. Then I had a dream where God told me it was OK, no human being had fathered this child; I was to be his father on earth. So together we waited and wondered what it meant to be parents of the Son of God.

Gospel

Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." [Matthew 1:20-21]

Prayer

Father, may we have eyes to see and ears to hear your messages to us, whatever their form. Amen.

Magi

Meditation

We believe that God communicates with us via the stars and planets. This star was the most astonishing sign in the sky that I had ever seen. Even the oldest among us had never seen anything like it. We knew it must be the sign of something vitally important to the entire world. Based on where the star was, we concluded the momentous event was in Israel. We understood that there would eventually be another king of Israel from the lineage of David, and only such an event would justify a celestial sign like this. We set out in haste to go to Israel and see this wonder for ourselves. How fortunate we felt as we anticipated falling down in homage before so great a King!

We were very surprised at the reaction of Herod and the chief priests and scribes when we arrived in Jerusalem. Of course, we thought the baby would be born there and would be the cause of great rejoicing! Herod did his best to find out from us where to find the baby and how old he was likely to be, but we could tell from his reaction that he meant to kill the newborn king, so we gave him as little information as possible.

Gospel

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at

seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way. [Matthew 2:9-12]

Prayer

Father, like the Magi and St. Francis, may we see signs of Your presence in all of creation. Amen.

King Herod

Meditation

The Messiah? Of course, who doesn't know the prophecies? Not that I had any expectation they would be fulfilled – ever. The dynasty of David is over; power is here now for those who can take it for themselves, and I'm good at that. Imagine my shock when foreigners show up in Jerusalem looking for the newborn King! We can't have THAT. No matter how that plays out, the Romans will make sure THEY stay in control. If I want my part of the power, I have to make sure I'm on the winning side. I've killed for power before, and I have no problem with doing it again.

Gospel

Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" [Matthew 2:4-6]

Prayer

Jesus, help us to remember that God makes all things work together for good, even as we work to eliminate evil as much as we can. Amen.

Shepherds

Meditation

We're about the lowest social class, above the lepers that is. We sleep with the sheep out in the fields, so of course we smell like sheep. People accuse us of all kinds of bad things, and of course there are those who confirm all those prejudices. In any case, we have to be out caring for the sheep, so we can't be in the synagogue and praying all the time, so people don't think we're very holy. That made it all the more amazing when we saw the angels. I never imagined there could be so many angels – and the

singing was amazing! I barely knew there was such a thing as a Messiah, but after the angels came, I couldn't wait to see that baby for myself.

Gospel

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. [Luke 2:15-20]

Prayer

Lord, may we accept and honor witnesses to your presence regardless of their status in the world. Amen.

Simeon

Meditation

I'd been waiting so long for the Messiah! Some days I just wanted to tell God, I've had enough, you promised I'd get to see Him in this life, but I'm tired and it's OK. But God wasn't ready to take me, so I kept on. Finally, I had this feeling that I needed to go to the Temple. When I got there, I noticed this couple who were presenting their firstborn son to the Lord. I knew in my heart that God had kept his promise – here was the Messiah! Alleluia!

Gospel

[Simeon] took [Jesus] into his arms and blessed God, saying:

"Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." [Luke 2:28-32]

Prayer

Father, help us to be patient and trust that You will keep your promises. Amen.

Anna

Meditation

I often saw Simeon in the temple. Us old-timers have a kind of understanding, I guess, that God has us where He wants us, and that we have to be patient and wait to see why we're here. Well, this was enough reason for everything I've ever done in my life! I've never seen Simeon so excited as he was

when he saw Jesus with Mary and Joseph. Of course, I had to come and see too! What a blessing for us to be present for the beginning of a new era in human history.

Gospel

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. [Luke 2:36-38]

Prayer

Jesus, help us to avoid using our age as an excuse to stop seeking you. Amen.

Jesus

Meditation

Yes, I was waiting too. As I had come into human time, so I had to wait, growing in Mary's womb, and then growing and maturing in the home of Joseph and Mary. It's impossible to explain what it was like to go from being omnipotent and omnipresent to being limited to being in one place at one time. In God's time, there is no waiting for things to happen!

Gospel

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [John 1:1-5]

Prayer

Father, Son, and Spirit, enliven our hearts that we may be prepared to celebrate the Nativity. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Conclusion

Waiting is an integral part of human life. Whether we're waiting in anticipation, in dread, or just in boredom, we have no choice but to mark time passing until something happens. Let us continue to wait in joyful expectation for the coming of the Lord!