

**Advent 2023: In The Waiting**  
**Luke 1:26-56**  
**Jennifer Souter**  
**December 10, 2023**

I feel like in our culture, waiting gets a bad rap. A study in 2022 explored how consumers feel about waiting and, in particular, waiting in line. This study determined that waiting in line is a timeless form of torture. And in fact, in the U.S. alone, Americans in total spend roughly 37 billion hours each year waiting in line.

You know what? Maybe I change my mind. Waiting deserves the bad rap it gets. In all seriousness, though, either you love it or you hate it. There is rarely an in between. Ask a child if they are excited for Christmas or their birthday, and they more than likely will tell you that they can't wait! There is so much joy, love, and hope in their heart.

As we grow up, though, we become awakened to the reality of pain and suffering. We no longer have the privilege of childish dreams of sugar plums dancing in our heads. Life is hard. Waiting even harder.

Last week, Pastor Layne challenged us to sit in silence with the questions of "What is hard in our lives?" What do we feel defeated by? Where are we lacking hope?

Advent is this beautiful season within the church calendar where we are given permission to sit, to be still, and feel the hard. Advent is a time marked by waiting. The people of Israel were waiting for their Messiah. You, today, may even be waiting for your Messiah, your Savior to show up in the hard things of your life.

The world at Christmas, though, is the complete opposite. There are lights and music and happy, merry everything. There are parties and gatherings where everyone seems to have it all together. There are Christmas movies that always, always end right. It is challenging to experience Advent, to sit and be still, to wait.

Multiple things can be true at the same time, right? We can be laughing while in deep grief. We can feel lucky to care give for someone we love and feel EXHAUSTED by it. We can be hopeful for what's to come and terrified of what it might mean. We can feel excited about our

changing families and full of dread of what we'll miss. We can enjoy all that Christmas brings and sit in the waiting.

There is no other person in the Christmas story that was able to feel multiple things at the same time than Mary. Let's read the first part of Mary's story in Luke 1:26-37:

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called<sup>[a]</sup> the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For no word from God will ever fail."

Mary was filled with fear, confusion, and worry. And honestly, I don't blame her one bit. Suddenly, she found herself pregnant and unwed—a cultural no-no at the time. Her fiancé Joseph would have every reason to break it off as soon as he knew the truth, leaving her futureless and disgraced.

Can you imagine the thoughts in Mary's head? We have all been there when we get life-altering news. "I don't understand." "How can this be?" "This can't be happening." "What am I

going to do?” Fear. Worry. Confusion. They all filled her mind, and they dominated her heart. “God, what are you doing?” For us, we might even ask, “Where are you, God?”

Rarely when we receive life-altering news does it get resolved right away. Most of the time we have to wait. And most of the time, we wait in fear, worry, confusion. In fact, it might feel like that is where we now live.

Henri Nouwen, a spiritual thinker and writer, shared a concept in many of his books that I would like to share with you this morning. He suggests that the invitation to communion with God and others requires that we move from the house of fear to the house of love. Both fear and love are less like simple emotions and more like places in which we choose to take up residence. Nouwen observed, “Fear has become an obvious dwelling-place, an acceptable basis on which to make our decisions and plan our lives.” When you get life-altering news, when you are then forced to wait, when you think about the hard things in your life—do you go to the house of fear? Or do you go to the house of love?

I don’t know about you, but most of the time I reside in fear. I want to take control, make a plan, figure it out. I want to answer every “what if” question I can think of. And I quickly find myself being dominated by fear, by anxiety. Fear causes even more fear, and we cannot reason our way out of it. And if God is silent in the waiting, that often invites doubt, uncertainty, and thoughts of His displeasure with us. So what do we do? How do we move from the house of fear to the house of love?

A few weeks ago in kids’ ministry, our elementary students during the 11:00 hour did a worry wad activity. It was powerful, and I felt led to do it with all of you this morning. I want you to get out a piece of paper and just hold it. In a minute but not yet, I am going to give you a moment of silence to think about the hard things in your life right now—the life-altering news you maybe have just received. After our time of silence, I will bring us back together.

Friends, think about the hard things in your life right now. What are you waiting for? What fears or worries does that bring to the surface? Let’s take a moment of silence to think about those things. Now that we have those things in the forefront of our minds, I want you to take your piece of paper and scrunch it up into a ball to represent what you are waiting for,

what you are worried about. You can then put it to the side or hold it. We will use it again in a little bit.

For Mary, she was worried that Joseph would leave her and that her life would never be the same again. Shame would come upon her and her family, and yet Mary made a choice. She decided that she was not going to wait in the house of fear. There had to be another path.

Let's read Luke 1:38-56:

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."  
Then the angel left her.

<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:  
"My soul glorifies the Lord  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”  
<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.”

Mary moved to the house of love. Did it change her circumstance? No, it did not. Did she get to stop waiting? No, she did not. The fear was still there. The worry was still there. The confusion was still there. What changed was her view of God! The place where she resided.

The house of love is not simply a place in the afterlife, a place in heaven beyond this world. God offers us this house right in the midst of our anxious thoughts.

Mary was able to praise and glorify God, because she chose to believe in His goodness, in His faithfulness, in His plan for her life. She chose to trust Him in the midst of her waiting, in the midst of her fear. She embraced that some things are out of her control and lets everything rest on a goodness far beyond herself.

Mary also didn't stay isolated. The Scripture tells us that she hurried off to see Zechariah and Elizabeth. When we are waiting, when the fear begins to dominate, we tend to just stay there. We don't share the news with others. We don't want people to make a big fuss. Or maybe our family and friends have their own things to deal with, and we can't add one more thing to their plate.

Mary didn't believe that. She needed someone to help her, someone that would understand, someone who would simply be with her. Elizabeth her relative was that person. The angel had told Mary that Elizabeth, who was unable to conceive, was in her sixth month. If

anyone could understand, it would be Elizabeth, so Mary hurried off. Mary was looking for an explanation. She was looking for understanding. She was looking for love.

And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth's reaction was unlike anything Mary was expecting. Elizabeth's response is anything but quiet and reserved. Our passage mentions her loudness. You know what it is like when someone greets you unexpectedly? A beloved person who you haven't seen for a long time. I see Elizabeth embracing Mary and almost shrieking for joy. But her greeting is more than loud—it is spiritual and Spirit-filled.

Elizabeth blesses Mary and the child she is carrying. Elizabeth goes on to commend Mary and says in verse 45, “Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” Mary, you know that God will be with you and is with you. And because of those words, that blessing, Mary found what she needed and so much more. She was safe. She was accepted. She was loved and not just by Elizabeth. Remember the Holy Spirit was speaking through Elizabeth. It was God Himself saying to Mary, “I will be with you. I love you.”

The house of love is the house of Christ, the place where we can think, speak, and act in the way of God—not in the way of a fear-filled world. From this house, the voice of love keeps calling out: Do not be afraid.

I want to say again: Mary's circumstances did not change. Mary's waiting did not just magically disappear. What changed was that Mary was no longer dominated by her fear but by love. God's love for her. She was in the house of love.

This shift of residence for her allowed her to praise God with the most beautiful song we have in Scripture. Mary was able to praise God because even if Joseph decided to break it off with her, she believed in the promise of God's presence to be with her. And for Mary that was enough.

Friends, that is our good news as well. When fear comes our way in the waiting, it can be overcome with the love of Christ residing within us, residing within others. My prayer is that no matter the hard things we are going through, may the promise of God's presence be enough.

I want you to get your paper ball out again. Now fold your hands together with the ball inside. We are going to have another moment of silence, and I want you to imagine that Jesus is holding your hand and carrying your worry with you, that He is with you in the waiting.

I encourage you to pray and talk with Jesus. You could tell Him that you trust Him in the waiting, that you love Him, that you know He is with you. Maybe you aren't ready for that yet—it is okay. Ask God the questions you have. "God, why am I still waiting?" "Why do bad things keep happening?" "Where are you?" "I don't feel you." "I can't see you in the waiting." Trust me—God would love to hear those questions. There is no right or wrong response in this moment.

We will take another moment of silence for us to commune with God. I want you now to take your ball and smooth it out, and with the pen write "God is with us." Friends, this is the good news. This is the hope in the midst of waiting, in the midst of fear. God is with you. God is with me. God is with everyone.

Mary believed multiple things at the same time. She was filled with joy that God would choose her to carry His Son, and she was fearful of what Joseph and others might think. Both of these things are true. Both are real. But rather than stay in the house of fear being dominated by worry, she chose a different path. She chose the house of love. She chose to believe that God would be with her and is with her.

As a staff, we asked people within our congregation to write testimonies of the waiting they are experiencing. I want to read a few of them to you this morning.

**From someone in need of physical healing:**

"Oh, God" were the first words I spoke when my "waiting for healing" journey began. In the following days, I experienced frustration, impatience, discouragement, and fear not knowing what the future held for me. When I woke up in the morning, I would be reminded of my inconvenience and all throughout the day. At night, I would wonder if this would be the night I would receive my healing. As I still wait for healing, lyrics of songs, verses from the Bible, and the prayers and concerns of friends give me encouragement and hope that the healing will come. Now my prayer is expanded to "Oh, God, how long?"

**From someone in deep grief:**

The darkness I'm waiting to be illuminated would be to see the return of joy and hope in my life and my family's lives. Everyday can be a struggle, but holidays are the hardest struggle. Within the past five years, I have become a widow, lost my only sister, put down our dog of 13 years, moved to a different house, and my son graduated from high school, who is less dependent on me. These were and are hard life-changing situations to deal with and all within such a close time frame. Since this time, I feel a lot of different emotions. Sometimes it's intense fear and anxiety that something else traumatic will happen. Sometimes it's hopelessness, not knowing where I fit in anymore. Loneliness is something I also struggle with daily. It's challenging trying to start over and venture into new territories. I have been able to see God's blessings in so many small, indiscreet ways that I feel guilty for not appreciating these more. I truly believe that God has to have a really good plan in store for my life. Until that time, I wait.

**From someone experiencing heartache:**

When a mother gives birth to a child, she doesn't live life with the expectation of losing them. My darkness is experiencing life without two of my children: one whom I miss terribly but have the comfort of knowing is with Christ, and the other who suddenly cut me out of their life. The pain seems unbearable at times, and the anxiety of holidays or special days not being normal and missing my grandchildren can leave me fearful that God won't answer my prayers for reconciliation and restoration because of the human will. This is when I have to lean into Christ's love for me, with thankfulness that He is there, even though the pain may remain.

Friends, that is my prayer for you, my prayer for me. When the waiting is overwhelming and fear comes that God won't answer our prayers, may we move to the house of love knowing, trusting, believing that He is there. The pain remains but God is with us. God with us on the beautiful days and the impossible ones. God with us as we celebrate and as we mourn. God with us as we make infinite choices or have very little choice at all. God with us when we have no other choice but to keep going, to keep waiting.



Multiple things can be true at the same time, right? This is the beauty of Advent. The waiting of Advent is one marked by hope. It is not a “wish list sent to Santa Claus” hope. Advent hope is gritty. It is courage. It is resolve. It is hope in the face of impossibilities.

Mary displayed gritty Advent hope. May it be from this place, this house of love, that we, too—regardless of what we are waiting for, regardless of what we are afraid of—that we can join with Mary and proclaim “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” because there is no place we can go that God has not already been.