

WAITING
Lk 1:39-55; Jn 1:19-28
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Thomas D. York
Knox Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

What shall we make of these stories of the birth of Jesus? Not only the angelic announcements to Elizabeth and Mary, but all the rest of the familiar narratives - the stable and manger, the angelic choruses singing for shepherds, the mysterious star in the night sky, and magi from the East? Truth? Fiction? Legend? Fact? Fairy stories for children or for those of us who are older, seeking the lost innocence of children, perhaps?

There are two approaches to these stories which I find self-defeating. One is to treat them as unvarnished fact, for they quite obviously are poetry - the human mind soaring to express the wonder and mystery of God coming close to earth and to life. They were not intended to be one-dimensional descriptions of matter-of-fact events, which is what happens when we take them literally. To hold too fast to the miraculous shell of any of these events is to miss the essential miracle.

But equally self-defeating is to treat the stories as no more than pretty and appealing stories with no inherent relation to the mystery they are trying to express. There is an "It isn't really so, but wouldn't it be nice if it were?" quality that leads to the commercialism and sentimental excesses of much of the Christmas celebration.

This morning, let's go back and try to recapture something of the wonder and mystery expressed through these fantastic accounts.

Remember, first, that they were written for believers by believers. They were not intended for the outside world. Like our own family customs and traditions at Christmas, each family developing over the years its own Christmas traditions which may seem lovely or odd to the outsiders, they carry deep meaning for those on the inside of the family. And so it is with the nativity stories. Although their origins are impossible to discover, we know that they arose after the resurrection. That is, the post-resurrection community of believers in the unbelievable glow of Christ alive, the Lord of all, wondered about the beginnings of his life, this Jesus Christ.

So as they worshipped together in wonder, the traditions, the stories, the poetry were formed. Take these stories out of the worship of God in Christ risen from the dead, and they're almost ridiculous. But in the context of the faith of the community, they express the joy, the hope, the wonder, the mystery of God coming to earth as a child. After all, how would you describe the incredible except in story, miracle, visions and poetry?

So, today, for us the believers, or half-believers, or the wish-we-could-be-believers, they serve to open us up to the dimensions of mystery and wonder that always accompany the presence of God among us. At every crucial point in the New Testament, whether at his baptism, or resurrection, or at Pentecost, the writers resort to poetry and fantastic imagery.

Even at our ordinary human level, when we want to communicate the depths of our feelings about some reality - we grope for symbols, often poetic symbols to communicate it. So we walk

into the house with flowers that will fade in a day, or a gift. And the expression always carries more weight than the thing itself.

So with these birth stories. They open us up to dimensions of mystery and wonder in life. And because of all this, precisely because of all this, we are tempted to sentimentalize the Christmas story and over-sentimentalize the celebration of Christmas this year, as every year, in a world into which God comes.

So, lest we forget, 10,000 people will be murdered by handguns again this year. For every marriage, more than one in three will end in divorce; cancer, strokes and heart disease are still big killers, matched only by slaughter on the highways; persons all over the world, and yes even in Cincinnati, struggle for their very existence.

And this was the world, changing the details of it here and there, this was the world of Elizabeth and Mary, too - death and disease and hopeless old age, poverty and ruthless power, human life held cheap, the whole bit.

So it is we've succumbed to the mood of celebration before the event except for one thing - the color of this season. Everywhere else, the colors are exciting reds and greens and golds, colors appropriate for celebration - but the liturgical color in Advent is different - it's purple. A somber, rich but quiet color, the same color we use in Lent - purple. A thoughtful, reflective color. It seems out of place, somehow, and it is, especially as we approach Christmas.

But that somber color says, "Wait." It plays out the charade of marking certain festival days to the hilt. So the child has not arrived yet. Mary and Joseph are still wandering. There is still not room at the inns by the roadside. Nobody is paying any more attention to this wandering couple than we do to any pregnant woman and her husband. It's still the darkness before the dawn. And so the gospel for today declares, "There stands one among you whom you do not know." The words are from John the Baptist, but it is indeed God's word to our time, or any time, whose color is purple.

For the church has a long memory, longer than yours or mine, longer, certainly, than the world's which hates to remember disappointment, disillusionment, and misplaced hope. But the church remembers in its scriptures and in the charade-like pageant of the church year. The church remembers that scriptures can be read as a long account of one disillusionment after another, as hopes were raised and dashed again.

So in the middle of the world's hurrah for Christmas is coming, the church holds up a warning hand, dresses itself in somber, quiet purple, and says, "Wait, think, consider, remember - especially remember."

Remember especially the overpowering urge we have to control this God who comes in the form of a child. One of the great deceptions about God coming in the form of a child, with all the romantic trappings of a stable and a lovely young girl-mother, is that a child is easy to control. After all, that's part of what delights us about any child - we can enjoy him, get stars in our eyes about his future, delight in the innocence written all over his face, and then when he begins to

fuss and cry, feed him, pick him up, and plop him in another room until he's rested and content and ready to smile and respond again. How different from a 12-year-old or a rebellious torn-apart teenager, or the adult with a mind and a will all of his own. That gets difficult - uncontrollable, actually. No, we'd far rather welcome a child, a tiny child in a manger who sleeps most of the time; so blessed, so innocent, so harmless, so controllable.

And so, this is our dilemma. There is something in us which wants the child to come on his own terms, with his game, his dance, with peace on earth, goodwill to all, but that perfectly honest and sometimes even burning desire is always in conflict with our attempts to have him, control him, have him play our game, join our party; and the quiet reflective color of purple on an Advent Sunday says, "Watch out."

In ancient times, it was thought that if you knew the name of a demon or a god you could get it under your control. So Jacob, struggling with the unknown demon or angel or god in the waters of the Jabok, asked to know his name. So the ancient Jews refused even to name the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day, we still don't know the Hebrew name of God, how the name of God was pronounced.

We are less finicky today. In some parts of the church the very essence of the faith is captured in the phrase, "Accept Christ as your personal savior." That's dangerous business - it's too individual, it's too possessive, like the bumper sticker, "I found it." The personal too often ignores the needs of others which are central to the gospel, so a pious effort to have Jesus ends up pushing him away and making him an exile.

So from the best of motives, and from the worst, all our efforts to have this Jesus, who comes into this world as a child destined to grow up, end in distorting him and rejecting him, because God never has been had. God refused to join our party, join in our dance, play our game. And so the church wears purple right up to the last week before Christmas.

The church remembers the one who came, and comes, and will come again - and says "wait" - and in the waiting may we find that peace which passes all our understanding. Amen.