

Luke 1:26-38
December 21, 2008

South Plains
4th Sunday in Advent

Waiting With Mary

Jerusalem is waiting.

The city waits with dread for Herod's wrath

As word arrives that heav'n announced a king.

No one but pious fools and angels hope

Aloud that he might be Messiah.

However, underneath there still lurks hope.

So John is waiting, witness to the light.

The camel hair creates an itch, desire

To cry out loud and warn the world of fire,

To offer water to assuage uneasy minds.

Isaiah waits.

A dusty prophet's voice unrolled when some

Invited preacher comes to synagogue

And chooses for his text a challenge to

The rich oppressors who enslave the poor.

We wait with them, straining toward the mystery

Of fully God and fully human form,

Reluctant to unravel faith and fact,

But curious like a cat who eyes the wraps

And ribbons hiding Christmas gifts and joy.

Mary is waiting.

Unlike all others, Mary waits for her

Conception. Looks for telltale signs that mark

Her progress toward the day she cuts the cord

That binds her son to her, that cord that saves

A mother's boy from mission in the world.

That day must come like thunder after lightning.

We cannot wait with the city.

We haven't Jewish patience to sustain

Those centuries of expectation hung

By threads of promise, dreams and such.

So many hopes have vanished in the mist.

We cannot wait with John,

Weird, unyielding prophet with no propriety.

At any rate, we know he's doomed.

Nor will we wait beside Isaiah's scroll

With cryptic hints and warnings that surprise.

We'd rather wait with Mary, mild and young,

With innocence to keep her waiting strong

To watch for any evidence her king

Is coming near, or growing big inside.

Mary waits on tenterhooks for wedding day,
Mindful that the promised throne of David
Could pass through Joseph who is her betrothed.
She knows the prophecy which thwarted David's
Hope to build a temple, but anchored hope
The Lord would make a royal house,
a dynasty forever.

She hopes betrothal vows will trump embarrassment
In Joseph's mind.

She does not know an angel advocates
That Joseph makes the promised marriage true.
Strange union this arrangement to fulfill
So many hopes, allay so many fears.

Our hopes all stumble when we try to mix
King David's present land with Christian schemes
Of freedom for the faith of Moslem friends;
And so we center faith on virgin birth,
An easier thing, and turn away from laws
Or justice and the politics of right.

We wait in willful ignorance,
Agnostic toward the reign of God in our
Contentious world, divided into tribes.
Uncertain, fearful of offense, we parse
Our scripture, sermons and our lives
To skirt the troubles of the world.
We have no room for problems not our own.

Mary, much perplexed and pondering what this

Greeting means:
"Hail Mary, full of grace," can only listen first.
She knows she's undeserving of this favor,
A kindness more than cordial greeting,
A fullness of God's grace that indicates
A love divine brought by an angel straight
From heav'n.

How shall we understand such favor when
her lineage boasts ancestors lost to time,
And she's too young, wrong sex, for anyone
To do great things for God and country.
The angel's explanation only deepens mystery
And throws us back on God's unearned free love.

The child to be will holy be
And called the Son of God.
Sweet Mary's song Magnificat will pique
our curiosity for miracles
that fill the hungry, send the rich away.

But first we wait for God to empty God's
Own self of power and majesty divine.
This child will take a manger for his bed
And entertain poor shepherds who
Will carry news of God's arrival back
To flocks of sheep, the sheep of God's own field.

Does Mary dream while pond'ring what this means?

We dream this advent full of fears and hopes.
Some wish for simple pleasures in the home –
A quiet rest from argument and strife,
Relief from pain if not the miracle of health,
Or safety for a military friend,
And peace on earth, and always peace on earth.

And what does Mary do to justify her gift?

She leaves with haste to see Elizabeth,
Confirms the sign that God can seed a virgin
Or an ancient, barren womb with child.
She sings a song of praise that honors God
And keeps her cousin company three months.

How often we ignore the miracles around

Us, seeing only signs of luck and our
Own ingenuity, our scientific work,
Our high tech labors and our cash.

Mary waits with eyes wide open to her Lord's

Strong arm and clever fingers weaving dreams
Into the daily pattern of our lives.
She passes time in simple friendship lightened
By a tune or borrowed verse from Hannah's song,
An ordinary round of work and worship.

If we would wait with Mary

We'd best abandon gifts except when giving,
And think about the duties of our love
Toward neighbors near and far, delight in song,
Or prayer that voices faith and hope in Christ's
Ability to change the world for good;
And we would underestimate all human plans.

And, one thing more.

When Gabriel has laid the Lord's plan out
From virgin birth to Jesus' reign on earth,
The girl with whom salvation will begin
Has but one answer, "Here I am.
The servant of the Lord" accepts God's grace.
And "let it be with me according to your word."

To wait with Mary means we take her stance:

Accepting, open to a world of grace,
Or rather to a kingdom not this world,
And yet a rule within a world in need
Of plain unvarnished kindly deeds of care.

It means we might begin to dream of over

Turning wrongs and raising up the wronged
Until the upside down will soon be right,
And meek replaces strong in virtue's rank.

And you and I, what are we waiting for?

Shall we who have so much of this world's goods
Place all our hopes on Wall Street's jagged graph?
Dare we suppose that science, our old friend,
Will save us from disease and pain at end?
And is it good to ask our youth to lift
Our spirits, bear our past into their fast
Approaching present tasks and duties?

The time allotted us will never be

Enough to freeze our triumphs or preserve
The little good we've done. We need to cast
Our anchor in the deep beyond all depths,
And fasten who we are to one we trust
Will carry mem'ry always in his breast;
And more: we need to rest eternally
In grace that will not let us go, for love
Of Christ who came and comes in hearts that wait
Until he comes again.

We wait with Mary. Bearing nothing but

Acceptance of the word that comes to us
On pages yellow from disuse, or lined
For emphasis. We listen for the songs
We know, anticipating that some snatch
Of inspiration will revive our souls.

We wait with Mary, full of fear and rev'rance.

Aware these moments come but once a year,
When angels sing and tell a working man
To go to Bethlehem. When stars will talk
And send professors traveling far away.
When vacancies are closed to all but those
Abased and willing to accept a stall.

We wait with Mary, knowing all too well

That gratitude defines our first response;
Obedience our next desire, and then
The sacrifice of giving what we have:
A little time, a talent or a life.

And waiting, always watching, and alert

For one who comes unbidden and at night
To turn us to his light and life until
All heaven and earth are God's.

We wait with Mary.