

December 27, 2020 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

I love listening to podcasts.

I would consider myself an avid podcast listener – I listen to a variety of both entertainment and news and just listening to good stories told well. In fact, my favorite way to start my workday is listening to a podcast while I walk to the church office in the morning.

One of my favorite podcasts I listen to is called The Daily, by the New York Times. It's a half hour podcast that comes out every day that covers the general news but dives a bit deeper into one specific news topic each day.

I remember listening to The Daily on the way to work right after the Pfizer vaccine was approved here in the United States. They had a reporter on the podcast who has been covering the coronavirus since day one as well as the long haul to get a vaccine. He was asked what this meant now that we had a vaccine – what would life look like now, what should we expect – and he very hauntingly replied- right now we are in the valley of the shadow of death.

It wasn't the answer I was hoping to hear, but he was speaking to the reality of our current moment.

We now see the light out the valley, the vaccine, but with Covid numbers as high as they have ever been – we are very much at the bottom of the valley of the shadow of death.

We have been waiting a long time for this vaccine – and we will have to wait a bit longer. Some of us longer than others.

I have several friends who are working in hospitals as physician assistants, and over the past week or so, they have all been vaccinated.

It has been so joyous for me to see people I know take the vaccine – to know it's here and real and people are getting it.

But, on the other side. I am young and not a front-line worker or an essential worker or a student – I will likely be among the very last to receive it. Months and months away.

We, all of us, find ourselves waiting in this valley – all seeing the path out – but we won't get to take it together. Some won't take it at all.

Our scripture today tells a similar tale of waiting.

Christ has just been born, our savior is here! But our savior is just a baby boy born to Jewish parents, they adhere to Jewish laws and take their son to Jerusalem to give a sacrifice and have him designated as holy to the lord. And when they get there, they meet Simeon and Anna. Both prophets, both very old, and both devout servants of God.

We know the Holy Spirit has told Simeon that he will not die before seeing the Messiah.

He's lived a whole lifetime of waiting. Waiting to meet the Messiah.

And here comes young Mary and Joseph – I imagine they are tired and overwhelmed – still adjusting to their roles and parents – still learning each other, and still probably very fearful of the weight upon their shoulders to raise the child of God.

And Simeon sees them and their little baby, and instantly, he knows his wait is over.

I can only imagine the power of that moment.

The old and mighty prophet Simeon delicately holding in his hands a little vulnerable baby, but knowing in this baby, his time has been fulfilled – his wait over. He can die in peace and go home to God.

I wonder if in his life-time of waiting he ever dreamed of what the messiah would look like, what he or she would be like – and in those ponderings, I wonder if he ever imagined the messiah would be so small he could hold him in his arms.

And just like that – his wait is over. His duty to God fulfilled.

He praises God and then gives a blessing to Mary – in which he essentially said – your wait has just begun. And it won't be an easy wait. And in fact, your heart is going to shatter.

What tension – such joy and such fear, such fulfillment for one and such a long road ahead for the others. It's in this moment, that we learn “any who take their faith seriously will eventually be confronted with the paradoxical

nature of it. Mature faith at times incites us to hold sorrow and joy simultaneously at critical junctures of our lives.”

I know you’ve felt that this Christmas, I have too. When you wake to realize that Christ is born into our world, only to have to keep waiting in isolation. Not able to be with those you love. The joy and hope that the birth of Christ represents – Simeon’s waiting fulfilled, but the long road ahead to being back together – Mary and Joseph’s waiting just begun.

Then Anna meets Mary and Joseph and the baby. She too sings praises to God and then begins preaching about Jesus – this little baby. She too had a life of waiting. She was married only 7 years, and then spent the rest of her life in the temple - worshipping night and day. And just like Simeon, in that moment, her wait is over, and she finds peace.

We have this grand moment that day in Jerusalem at the temple.

Two prophets who spent their lives devoted to God, waiting for the Messiah, have their life’s journey fulfilled.

But what happens next? Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus just go home.

The daily rhythm of their lives goes un-interrupted, they still have work to do.

Perhaps we can empathize with Mary and Joseph in this moment – knowing hope has been born into the world in a momentous way, but our lives continue. The wait goes on - but now we know God Emmanuel – Christ is with us in the valley.

Psalm 3 - “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me”.

Perhaps it’s enough to know Christ is with us in the wait.

Simeon tells Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel.” Not the rising and the falling. The falling and the rising. It’s all or nothing with Christ. Jesus doesn’t back away from humanity when we fail him – it’s in his falling, that he rises. He doesn’t rise first. He first falls. He fails. Anna echoes this reversal too – she worships night and day – not day and night. The night must come before the dawn.

This is the last Sunday of 2020. This year is almost over. And I don’t think it’s any kind of stretch to say we have fallen. We’ve hit the bottom of the valley. But here this good news: Emanuel – God is with us. The God who

falls and then rises has been born into the world and met us at the bottom.
All there is left to do is rise.

I feel hope today. I know there is still waiting to do be done, and each of our waiting will not look the same. Even in this small community, some of us will get the vaccine before others, some of us might be able to emerge from isolation more quickly, but Christ is with all of us.

As Simeon and Anna teach us – a mature faith holds room for both joy and sorrow, both wait and fulfillment.

But on this first Sunday after Christmas, we sing praises to God for the gift of both.

And just like Mary and Joseph, we go home and keep going about our lives, knowing God is with us while we wait.

Thanks be to God. Amen.