

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

I'm sure each of you can remember an event that you eagerly looked forward to for quite some time: your wedding day, perhaps, or the birth of a child, or maybe getting your driver's license or reaching retirement.

The closer the actual day came the more excited you became, right?

If you are like many people at this point in the season, you may be about ready to wrap up Advent and to unwrap Christmas presents. You may be looking forward to a beautiful Christmas Eve Mass and eager to observe family traditions around the table or tree.

For many of us, our day-to-day experience of anticipation does not offer much insight into the ancient Israelites' waiting for the Messiah. There are few modern-day examples of the kind of long-term waiting they had to engage in. The closest thing I've heard about in the news recently was the story about people from North Korea seeing relatives in the south for the first time in 60 years.

Now, that was a long wait!

But even a long wait like that pales in comparison to the waiting that had to continue generation after generation. To have to wait for that long carries a strong temptation to just give up hope and sink into some form of discouragement and despair.

Generation after generation the people of Israel yearned for peace and harmony in their own land and with their neighbors.

Age upon age they prayed that God would send the shepherd that Micah describes in today's first reading.

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

They had to remain faithful to hoping that the promise would be fulfilled.

To recall Israel's history of faithful expectation helps us better appreciate the momentous occasion Luke intends to convey in today's Gospel.

In these few brief lines we hear that Israel's long-awaited Savior and his herald are not only already in the womb but now are even under the same roof!

Through the power of the Holy Spirit what might have been an unremarkable family visit on an ordinary day in a rural village becomes the intersection of two periods of human history.

Elizabeth, with John the Baptist in her womb, embodies the former generations. She bears the prophet who will point the way to the promised one.

Mary, with Jesus in her womb, embodies a new beginning. She bears the transforming fulfillment of Emmanuel—God with us.

Luke describes the meeting of these two women as being charged with excitement. Anticipation is palpable in every phrase:

Mary travels "in haste." John "leapt" in his mother's womb. Elizabeth is "filled with the Holy Spirit." Then, she exclaims to Mary, "Blessed are you who believed," celebrating Mary's faithfulness to God's plan for humanity's salvation unfolding right before their eyes.

Listening to this Gospel we can get swept up in the euphoria. It's almost too much to take in!

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

Imagine how Luke's first audiences must have delighted in the story. Jesus was the answer to their ancestors' prayers—finally—and they had to have been filled with joy.

We have long known the details of Jesus' first coming as a baby in Mary's womb. They can still fill us with joy as we recall them in these Christmas days.

The trick, I think, is to be able to link up with the long-term longing that still exists—our hope for the things that have not yet happened:

- things like an end to wars and racism and the ways we set up barriers between us,
- the day when every person born on the earth can count on having what she or he needs to live life with dignity, no matter what country they happened to be born in,
- the conditions in which there is harmony in all of the life of the planet so that true peace and flourishing can occur.

This final Sunday of the Advent season encourages us to discover those places in our own life where we can more fully experience—and express—God's good news.

Mary rushed to share her excitement with Elizabeth, even before the promised event had a chance to unfold.

Our faithful anticipation, if it is truly faithful anticipation, will put us in a similar frame of mind—to hurry to share the good news of what God is doing in the world—to bolster our hope in the midst of our waiting for God to complete the work he has begun in us and in the world.

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

1. Recall an event you eagerly looked forward to:

Wedding day

The birth of a child

Getting your driver's license

Reaching retirement

The closer the day came, the more the excitement, right?

2. Day to day anticipation does not offer much insight into long-term waiting.

We have few examples of that.

Reunions in Korea?

3. Even a long wait pales in comparison to the waiting that had to continue generation after generation.

Having to wait that long carries the temptation to rewrite our expectations, maybe even give up hope.

The people of Israel had to wait for centuries for the coming of the Messiah—longer than the U.S. has even been a country.

Age upon age they prayed that God would send the shepherd described in the first reading. They had to remain faithful to hoping that the promise would be fulfilled.

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

4. This persistent hope forms the backdrop to Luke's portrayal of Mary's visit: a momentous occasion beyond happy news.

Who wouldn't be happy for Elizabeth? But much more than that was going on.

It was a meeting for the ages: promise meets fulfillment.

5. Luke's description is charged with excitement:

"in haste," "leapt," "filled with the Holy Spirit," "cried out in a loud voice," "Blessed are you who believed."

The long-awaited salvation has arrived, and is unfolding before their eyes.

Hearing about it again invites enthusiasm, maybe even euphoria.

6. And maybe not. We have known the story for a long time. Might have become immune to it.
7. The trick: to link up the joy of this story with our own long-term waiting.

We have a longing for things to be different:

That wars will finally end; that racism gives way to acceptance and harmony

That the day will come when everyone born on the earth has what he/she needs for a life with dignity, regardless of the country they are born into.

That we find that sustainable relationship with the earth that brings about a forest rather than a wasteland

Fourth Sunday of Advent - C

8. Mary had good news and rushed to share it
9. The Good News we have heard again today is meant to bolster our hope for salvation's completion.

With that frame of mind we are in a better position to bolster the hope of others.

Receiving the good news with joy makes us ready "to give an account of the hope that is within in." (1 Pt. 3:15)