



Waiting with Expectation

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Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-45

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Today we've this wonderful gospel story of Mary and Elizabeth. Joyfully, gladly, wonderfully coming together to awahi one another, in nurture, support and care. One thinking it would never happen, one not quite sure how it did, both are pregnant. Without hesitation, without question they embrace and ululate in delight. Together these expecting women wait.

Expectant and waiting – it gives waiting a purpose, this kind of waiting.

Amanda, your journey to ordination involved a lot of waiting with expectation. It is this way when discerning our way toward that which feels like a heart call.

The ordination process of discerning actually feels a bit more like waiting with hope rather than expectation. Confirmation you'll be ordained doesn't happen until after a final discernment interview - or in Amanda's case, 'Zoomernment' interview, by those vested with such task.

On reflection, Amanda, it's perhaps apt your ordination journey's been one of firsts. Not just a final discernment interview done via Zoom, but two years of training through lockdowns, bouncing from in person to on line engagement, concluding with an at-home-online pre-ordination retreat and downsized, one of multiple, ordination service.

Apt because we live in a time of firsts, locally and globally, a time of bewildering change that demands constant adaptation. It is into **this** time and place, you and we, is to speak and enact the gospel. This type of change isn't out or over there it's the kind that changes us.

We live in times of **such** change we wait less with expectation, and more with impatience. Most of us here can remember times when we didn't have cell phones, in fact, shock horror, times before computers. What on earth did we do with our time then, without the constant distraction? Passionate disagreements around the dinner table of my youth were resolved by reaching for the encyclopaedia.

We've all these devices to make life more efficient, but the net effect is to make us go faster and expect more. Patient waiting's become an exercise in frustration. It doesn't seem to **get** us anywhere. It renders us passive and powerless. For to get on we need to take the initiative and make things happen.

I wonder whether, in our rush, we've lost something, some quality of living. With interest I read, in the book *4000 weeks*, of Jennifer Roberts, a teacher of art history at Harvard University. The first assignment she sets her students is, "to choose a painting or sculpture in a local museum then go and look at it for three hours straight. No checking emails or social media; no quick runs to Starbucks. (She reluctantly concedes that toilet breaks are allowed).

She insists the exercise take three hours precisely because she knows it's a painfully long time. Recognising "her students faced so many external pressures to move fast, She felt 'they needed someone to give them permission to spend this kind of time on *anything*,' ... 'to give them a different set of rules and constraints than the ones ... dominating their lives.'

"Here's what happens when you spend three unbroken hours on a small fold-out seat at the Harvard Art Museum looking at *Cotton Merchants in New Orleans*, a painting by Edgar Degas, with your phone, laptop and other distractions stowed out of reach in the cloakroom," author Oliver Burkeman writes "you spend the first forty minutes wondering what on earth you'd been thinking. You remember ... that you've always hated art galleries ... You contemplate shifting paintings from a work that strikes you as a self-evidently tedious choice (it shows three men, in a room, inspecting some bales of cotton) to a nearby alternative, which seems to

show many tiny souls being tortured in hell. But then you're forced to admit to yourself that making a fresh start, by picking a new painting, would be to succumb to the very impatience you're here to resist – an attempt to seize control over your experience in precisely the way you're seeking to avoid. And so you wait. Grumpiness gives way to fatigue, then restless irritation. Time slows and sags. You wonder if an hour has passed, but when you check your watch, you find it's been seventeen minutes.

And then, around the eighty-minute mark ... there's a shift. You finally give up attempting to escape the discomfort of time passing so slowly, and the discomfort abates. And the Degas begins to reveal its secret details ... Before long, you're experiencing the scene in all its sensory fullness.

Now you've abandoned your futile efforts to dictate the speed at which the experience moves, the real experience can begin. ... Your reward ... is to achieve ... a real sense of purchase on that reality – of really *getting stuck in* to life.”¹

Such waiting reveals patience, a capacity to engage deeply and intimately with life. **Now** is where life's happening.

Waiting, patience, expectation are all Advent words. Today we meet Elizabeth and Mary. Each is pregnant in unlikely circumstances and yet **there they are**, pivotal to our incarnation story. Elizabeth overflows with the words “blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished.”

What has this to do with our hyper fast driven world?

For many, if they're listening at all, incredulity may bring them to a screaming halt! One way to slow people down!! I want to pause a moment. What's this incredulity about? Is it at the unlikely improbability of the tale, is it that we see no **use** for the story, is it the implausible notion of a God up there dabbling down here? Or maybe we're just generally impatient to get on and we don't want to waste time thinking about what seems irrelevant.

¹Burkeman, Oliver Four thousand weeks: time and how to use it- The Bodley Head , London 2021

If we **can** persuade ourselves to pause a moment, be willing to look **into** this story, back just a touch to that Mary meeting Gabriel and what is said between them, before she gets pregnant. We discover Mary's incredulity, she doesn't get it either, she doesn't comprehend Gabriel's message. Rather than having it all carefully laid out and explained, Mary's simply told the Holy Spirit presence, she, will embrace Mary within the shadow of Mary's **unknowing**. She's **not** promised her life'll be easy, understandable or painless. Instead Mary's promised she'll be called to participate in a work so holy that it will bring her to the very edge of herself, every day. And precisely **there** she will be upheld.

This story of God indwelling flesh, we use the word incarnation, is pretty foundational to the Christian story.

Every day you're called to participate in a work so holy it brings you to the edge of yourself. Not given certainty, explanation or happy ever after promises. But invited to be **present** to your unknowing and to trust you'll be sustained and flourish in that perilous uncertainty.

A call to be present to life - the fragile, magnificent holy poise of each gossamer breath moment – it's utterly terrifying in its aliveness.

This story we tell is a compelling antidote to the story we must always be in a rush, a tearing hurry, to quite where to you imagine? To paraphrase Burkeman, "There's a powerful potency in one who's the capacity to resist the urge to hurry – to allow things to take the time they take - it's a way to gain purchase on the world, to do work that counts, and to derive satisfaction from the doing itself, instead of deferring all your fulfilment to the future."