

## "Hope Worth Waiting For"

In addressing the theme of hope, I found myself waffling from one slant to another. When in this type of predicament, it is generally a good idea to "get back to the basics." So I consulted the man who wrote a book about the basics, Mr. Webster; I looked up the word "hope" in the dictionary. And this is what I found, "hope-- desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment." Given this definition, we celebrate this first Sunday of Advent, this waiting for the coming of the Christ Child, this waiting for the coming of hope, this waiting for the desire accompanied by the expectation of fulfillment.

Since 2000, my family has driven to Florida almost every year. From our house to New Smyrna Beach is a long trip, 738 miles, with 638 being spent on I-95. Once we leave Emporia and hit the cruise control on the interstate, we begin to see billboards such as "Pedro's Weather Report: Chili Today, Hot Tamale," "Roads' Scholar," "Keep yelling, kids! (They'll stop.)," and my personal favorite "You never sausage a place. (You're Always a Wiener at Pedro's!)." Each sign counts down the number of miles to South of the Border, a tourist trap which combines themes of Dixie and Old Mexico. There are 120 billboards placed alongside a 175 mile stretch. The trip to Florida is a long one; the South of the Border billboards do little to help us wait, but they do certainly increase the anticipation.

My story of anticipation pales in comparison when laid beside Mary's story. As a good Jewish girl, Mary had anticipated the arrival of the Messiah since she was old enough to comprehend *language*. The coming of the Messiah, the Promised One, had been prophesied for more than 700 years. Many generations had heard the phrase, "when Messiah comes," yet most never saw the fulfillment of the prophecy. Entire civilizations had come and gone since the first revelation had fallen from the lips of the prophet.

Our Old Testament passage, the Scripture read during the lighting of the Advent candle, was penned 600 years before the angel appeared to Mary and was not the first Messianic prophesy. Jeremiah served as God's mouthpiece in telling the people that life was going to change. He told them that a better day was coming when a righteous ruler would succeed in his service to God and humanity, would make possible salvation and security, and would completely carry out covenant stipulations in his relationship with God's people as king.

I have no doubt that Mary was familiar with this prophecy, along with others. *Our* season of Advent lasts roughly a month. For the Jews, their season of Advent, waiting for the Promised One, had lasted for 700 years!

During that time frame, I am certain that many had lost a sense of hope. There is much to be said about patience, but 700 years is a long time to wait! Just imagine the changes our world has witnessed over the past 700 years. There was no United States, and explorers had not even landed in the New World. Christopher Columbus' great-great-great- great - great-grand-father was probably born roughly 700 years ago. But for the devout Jew, waiting for the Messiah was part of their lifestyle. For the committed Jew, God's word was not doubted; God's promises would be fulfilled one day. They lived in hope that they would see that day.

So Mary believed that the Messiah would come one day; that *she* would give birth to the Messiah was an altogether alien concept to her. Biblical scholars suggest that Mary was only in her early to mid teens when Jesus was born. She was probably between the ages of 13-16. Can you imagine the weight of responsibility heaped on these young shoulders?

When the angel appeared to Mary, I suspect that the word “surprised” doesn't do justice to the way Mary felt. “Shocked” may have been more appropriate. What about her parents? I wonder how Mary's parents reacted to her news? Do you think her parents *basked* in the thought that their good little engaged daughter was now pregnant, and Joseph was not even the father?

Speaking of Joseph, we know his reaction was certainly one of unbelief. Matthew's gospel tells us that an angel had to convince him not to break the legal engagement. This legal engagement, also called a betrothal, lasted one year. Our passage tells us that Joseph was a descendant of King David; he came from a prominent family. In our society, a comparison would be a relative of George Washington; because of the pedigree, that person would automatically have a certain amount of clout. Joseph's family had a good name; I am suspicious that Mary realized that Joseph's family would have reservations about the idea.

Initially, Mary was troubled with the thought of bearing the Messiah; this young teen was confused, alarmed, and even a bit skeptical. The appearance of an angel normally meant an impending *death*, yet this angel was declaring *life*. Frankly, I'd be troubled too if I had been in Mary's shoes. To assist her unbelief, Gabriel had to tell her *twice* that she had found favor with God. Verses 28 and 30 bear this out. Gabriel even offered proof that God was a part of this process. Gabriel shared with her that God could do the impossible; this was evident by the fact that even old cousin Elizabeth was expecting their first child. Mary had been *waiting* for the Messiah, and now she was going to be his *mother*! She was hoping for the good news that the Messiah had come, but coming through *her* was a news flash.

Because of her virginity and betrothal to Joseph, naturally she wondered how this would transpire. After all, girls with morals like Mary's did not even *think* like that. But she too probably wondered what kind of mother she would be to the Son of God. How would her life change? How would she respond to real situations involving this Christ Child? I imagine that during her pregnancy, not a day passed that she didn't wonder.

Although confused when the subject was introduced, Mary finally understood and gave her consent. She said, "Well, if Elizabeth is pregnant, you must be for real. Here I am Lord; do with me as you wish. Her anticipation of this child must have mushroomed as the months passed. With faith, Mary said ok to God; this step allowed the birth of Jesus. With hope, she became the vessel through which the world could know God fully.

Understand that this idea of hope can *also* carry the element of wonder. An element of doubt may have seeped into Mary's mind on more than one occasion. But the doubt never erased the hope. I contend that hope is stronger than doubt. Mary's witness is evidence of that. During Mary's personal season of Advent, she probably found herself depressed and anxious, as well as joyful and content. But her sense of hope was always there.

For us, we live 2000 years after these events. Today, I pose a question, "What is our hope?" Is it a "desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment?" And if so, for what are we hoping? I realize some children have possibly already made their Christmas lists, and many are hoping that Santa brings their heart's desire. But the hope of which I speak lasts much longer than a new video game or laptop.

During this Advent season, we are reminded to wait for the coming of the Christ Child. Let us not forget that when Jesus ascended into heaven after the resurrection, he told his followers that he would return. Many generations preceding Mary heard the phrase, "when Messiah comes"; Christians over the past two millennia have been placing their hope on this phrase, "when Jesus returns." More civilizations have come and gone since the ascension of Jesus than ever appeared between the initial prophecy of the Messiah and the birth of Christ. We celebrate Advent for one month, but in a broader sense, the wait has lasted 2000 years.

### Page 3

Just as many lost hope in waiting for the Messiah, many have also lost confidence regarding the return of Christ. But if you'll excuse the grammatical faux-pas, this hope is worth waiting for. As Christians, we should never lose hope, for without hope there is no reason to live. We know that God's promises are true and just as the Messiah came when least expected in an unlikely manner, Scripture states that Christ will return when *we* least expect it. As a result, we need to be people of hope. And we wait.

This time of year brings many feelings. During Advent, you may be depressed or anxious, joyful or content. Whatever your emotion, know that Mary also faced a season of wonder and uncertainty. But whatever you do, allow hope to remain. There is an old saying that goes, "Good things come to those who wait." Hope found in a daily walk with the Savior truly is a hope worth waiting for.