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Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.
We who have so much to do
seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.
We who are anxious over many things
look forward to your coming among us.
We who are blessed in so many ways
long for the complete joy of your kingdom.
We whose hearts are heavy
seek the joy of your presence.
We are your people, walking in darkness,
yet seeking the light.
To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, "Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don't just sit there and wait!" For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go....And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere around us is fear. People are afraid—afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us. And if we take a broader perspective—that not only individuals but whole communities and nations might be afraid of being harmed—we can understand how hard it is to wait and how tempting it is to act. Here are the roots of a 'first strike' approach to others. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, "Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you." These words set the tone and the context. Now Zechariah and Mary, Simeon and Anna are waiting for something new and good to happen to them....They have been able to wait, to be attentive, to live expectantly.

But what is the nature of waiting? What is the practice of waiting? How are they waiting and how are we called to wait with them? Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. "Zechariah..your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son.' 'Mary...listen! You are to conceive and bear a son.' People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun in us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Mary and Elizabeth were living with the promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them.

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and wait...

But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret...Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment.

A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore may want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare stay where they are...nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures her child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, 'Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.'...

Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope...Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord...let what you have said be done to me.' She was saying, 'I don't know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen.' She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God's love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

How do we wait? One of the most beautiful passages of scripture is Luke 1:39-56, which suggests that **we wait together, as did Mary and Elizabeth**. What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

I find the meeting of these two women very moving, because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." And Mary responded, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord" (Luke 1:45-46). She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

I think that is the model of the Christian community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible's most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening...It is saying "thank you" for the seed that has been planted. It is saying, "**We are waiting for the Lord, who has already come.**"