

Welcoming the Stranger

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
Forth Advent, December 21, 2014
by Kevin Guenther Trautwein
Text: Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-23

Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation, God's choice to dwell with humans as a human. One of the names that was given to Jesus was "Emmanuel," which means, "God with us." And so at Christmastime we celebrate Emmanuel.

But we're not in Christmas yet, we're still in Advent. And in Advent, we remember those who longed to see this miracle of Emmanuel – the miracle of God with us. And by remembering them, we become a little bit like them. For, although we have heard the story of the birth of the king, we, like them, continue to wait for God's dwelling with us to be fully realized – on earth as it is in heaven. And so, when we remember those who have gone before us, our waiting is joined with their waiting, and together our waiting becomes one.

–

This morning, I would like to consider Joseph. *What did waiting looking like for Joseph?*

John the Baptist, whom we looked at in first Advent, longed to see Emmanuel. He preached in the desert; he prepared a way in the wilderness. For John the Baptist, waiting meant getting things ready. I remember one time, as a child, waiting for my grandparents to come visit. They lived in southern Manitoba, and we lived up in Grande Prairie. Normally, we only saw them when we went to visit them. But this one time, they were driving across the prairies to come and visit us. On the day that we knew they were expected, my brother and I sat at the window looking out, wondering when they would arrive. But my mom, I'm sure, was not sitting at the window. She was busy preparing: cleaning the house, cooking a meal, getting everything in order. This is what waiting looked like for John the Baptist. He prepared things for the Christ.

Mary, whom we looked at in Second Advent, also longed to see Emmanuel. She could feel the child growing inside her, as she got bigger and bigger. And as she grew, I'm sure she became a little bit uncomfortable, and the waiting took a different form. When would this all be over? I'm sure there was a little bit of fear mixed in with the anticipation. What would the birth be like? Would it be painful? Would the child live? Would she die? But towards the end, I suspect that a big part of her waiting was hoping for relief. Though the moment would likely be difficult, she expected life and joy on the other side.

Even the angels, whom we looked at last week, at third advent, longed to see Emmanuel. Why would angels, who come and go from God's presence, long to see Emmanuel? Perhaps their waiting was a little bit like actors in a play. You've been practicing for months. You know every detail of the script; there are no surprises. But on opening night, you still get nervous. You long for others to see the work that you've been engaged in, the story that you've come to love. You long to see the look on their faces when the twists and turns of the plot are revealed. You long for the preparation to come to fruition. Though I'm not an actor, I sometimes get a similar sense of anticipation when I introduce a new book or musician to a friend. Even though I may be quite familiar with the story or with the music, I sometimes re-read it or re-listen to it, thinking about my friend. How will she read this book, and what will she notice that I hadn't? Or what will he hear in this song? What might speak to him that I completely missed? Anticipating someone else's experience can make the people and places that we are familiar with strange and new again. Whatever the waiting was like for them, 1 Peter chapter 1 tells us that the salvation of the human race, Emmanuel, is something that even the angels longed to see.

But what did waiting look like for Joseph?

1. Joseph's waiting looked like uncertainty

Unlike the other characters in the story, Joseph didn't know what he was waiting for.

Mary was Jesus' mother. Though she could have no idea what kind of a person Jesus would be, she knew that she was his mother. The child that would be born would be flesh of her flesh, and bone of her bone. But Joseph wasn't Jesus' father.

John was apparently Jesus' cousin. Even though they may not have known each other well, or they may never have even met – even still – you know how it is in families: news travels. You grow up hearing stories about family members, and so you have some idea of what to expect. But Joseph wasn't even Jesus' family.

The angels who dwell with God already knew the Word of God. Although they could not have known what the Word of God would be like when the Word became flesh, they knew the character of the Word of God. And so the angels had some idea of who they were waiting for. But Joseph was not an angel; he was a carpenter, whose life was wood and stone.

Joseph couldn't have known who he was waiting for. Waiting must have looked like uncertainty, apprehension, perhaps risk. He was waiting for a stranger, for a person about whom he knew nothing.

2. Joseph's waiting looked like hospitality

How could Joseph wait for someone whom he didn't even know? How could he welcome a stranger?

Joseph was an Israelite, and the Israelites had lots of experience with welcoming strangers. Strangers are quite common in the Hebrew bible.

The father of the Israelite people, Abraham, was a stranger himself, who wandered far from home in search of the Promised Land. Later, Abraham welcomed some strangers into his tent, and these strangers told him that he and Sarah would have a child, even though they were well past child-bearing years.

Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, were strangers in Egypt. The Egyptians feared these strangers, and tried to control them by making them into slaves. But God freed the slaves and led them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

When they got to the promised land, in Deuteronomy chapter 10, God commanded the children of Israel: "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, [he] is not partial and takes no bribe, [he] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Over and over again, the Israelites got into trouble when they treated strangers poorly. One of the main indictments of the prophets against the Israelites was their mistreatment of the strangers in their midst.

But we also have the story of Ruth and Naomi – a story about a time when the Israelites got hospitality right. In the first part of the story, Naomi was far from home – alone and vulnerable. So Naomi decided to return to her own people. As Naomi was preparing to leave, however, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, decided to leave her own people and go with Naomi. The rest of the story tells how Ruth, the stranger, was treated with hospitality until eventually she was integrated completely into Israelite society. In Matthew's gospel, Ruth is named in the genealogy as an ancestor of King David and of Jesus.

Hospitality toward strangers is such an important theme in the Hebrew Bible that I've only begun to scratch the surface. But in Israelite thinking, hospitality could only be extended to strangers. Welcoming your family or friends wasn't hospitality; it was an obligation. But in a time without hotels, in a place where water was scarce, and wells were guarded, and bandits roamed the roads, travelers relied on hospitality for their lives. Of course, there were also risks for hosts. If the stranger turned out to be a robber or an enemy, he might steal from you or worse. Hospitality was a deadly serious business for both parties.

So, as Joseph waited for Emmanuel, he knew that the child in Mary's womb was a stranger who posed a risk. But Joseph was a righteous man, and so he welcomed the stranger.

3. Joseph's waiting looked like the waiting that comes before fostering a child

What does it mean to think of children as strangers?

Normally we don't think of babies as strangers, but author Rodney Clapp has written a chapter called "Welcoming Children & Other Strangers," in which he discusses four ways in which children are strangers.

Children are strangers because they are completely alien to us. They know nothing of our language, our culture and customs. They have to be taught how to live in our world. And so they are like anyone who comes from another country. Arthur really is a little stranger to me. Sherri and I sometimes ask each other, "I wonder what Arthur will be like when he can talk? What kinds of things will he want to tell us?" We have our guesses, but for now that's all they are. Arthur remains a bit of a stranger to us.

But children are also strange because they copy us and, by copying us, they pick up these strange habits and mannerisms. They reflect our strangeness back to ourselves. Arthur is a great copy-er, but sometimes he does the oddest things. He might play a certain game or have a certain expression, which will seem strange, until I realize that it is a copy of me.

Children are strange because they don't belong to us. They belong to God, and, because of that, they have independence and a worth that does not derive from us. Arthur does not belong to me or to Sherri, he belongs to God. So we are not free to shape Arthur into our own image. Rather, we are entrusted with nurturing the image of God in Arthur.

And finally, children are strangers in our society because they freely admit their dependence on us. In a culture such as ours, which values self-sufficiency and autonomy, children are strange because they need others, and they know it. They shock us with their lack of independence. I might spend an entire afternoon and evening with Arthur, but at bedtime he will still ask me to sit with him while he falls asleep. This absolute dependence can be frustrating when I want to get things done, but, like a stranger, it also challenges my priorities.

So children really are quite strange. And in this way, any parent is a little bit like Joseph. We welcome little strangers into our lives, in the hopes that one day they won't be strangers anymore. And so all parenthood is an act of hospitality. Yet Joseph extends this kind of hospitality beyond biological parenthood. He was a foster parent, and so anyone who welcomes a child into their lives, especially when that child is not their own, follows in the footsteps of Joseph.

4. Joseph's waiting prepared him for disruption

What kind of a disruption could the baby Jesus possibly cause Joseph?

Welcoming the stranger was disruptive for Joseph because, once he accepted Mary and her unborn child into his protection, he could not abandon them. Their trials became his trials. As they traveled to Bethlehem, it might have been easy for an unattached man to find shelter, and he probably could have moved more quickly without a pregnant woman to care for. But Joseph's decision to welcome the stranger affected Joseph's options. He was forced to beg for shelter.

There is a Christmas tradition in many Spanish-speaking countries, which probably originated in Spain in the 15th century, of acting out Joseph's search for an inn. *Posadas*, which means "lodging" or "accommodation," is a nine day religious festival where Joseph leads Mary from house to house, begging for a place to stay.

"In the name of heaven," Joseph cries, "I request you grant us shelter, Given that she cannot walk. She is my beloved wife."

"This is not an Inn," The people inside the house respond. "Please continue ahead. I cannot open, you may be a robber."

"Do not be inhumane!" Joseph continues. "Grant us charity, since the King of heaven will prize you for it."

"Go away, already," the people inside again reply, "and do not bother me, because if I get upset I will beat you up."

Joseph continues to ask for help from houses along the street until, eventually, the predetermined house opens up to them and there is a celebration. In the *Posadas* festival, Joseph is remembered as a stranger on the road – a pilgrim – in need of shelter and support.

But Joseph's disruption continued after Bethlehem. Two years later, Joseph was forced to flee the violence of his home country and seek refuge in a foreign land. He lived in Egypt for a number of years, until he learned that those who wanted to harm Jesus were dead. Then he returned to Israel, but this time to the region of Nazareth, which was not his home. And so he became a stranger once again.

–

As we've seen, Advent looked different for Joseph than it did for the other characters. For Joseph, waiting involved a lot of uncertainty – even absolute uncertainty. More than any of the others, he could have had no idea who or what he was expecting.

But waiting also took the form of hospitality, of welcoming a stranger, with all of the risk that it involves. As a righteous Israelite, Joseph was expected to always be waiting to host a stranger.

For Joseph, waiting also looked like fostering a child, like preparing to meet a stranger for the first time, who would live in his house and make demands on him.

And finally, waiting, for Joseph, meant opening himself up to disruption.

As you remember Joseph this fourth Sunday of advent, what does waiting look like for you?

Does waiting in Advent look like Joseph's uncertainty? You may have doubts: about yourself, about your family and friends, or even about your church or your religion. You long for Emmanuel, but you have no idea what that means. One thing you can know is that Emmanuel will be completely Other than you. The birth of God-with-us will not be your doing, it will be a stranger, but you can choose to welcome it.

Does waiting in Advent look like Joseph's hospitality? Perhaps your life is settled right now. You're happy and comfortable. Are you prepared to welcome the stranger? Right now there are approximately 3.3 million refugees in Syria alone who, like Joseph, are trying to escape from violence and the threat of violence against their families. The government of Canada has publicly committed to accepting 1300 of these refugees by the end of 2014, but so far has only accepted, at last report, 457 individuals. Mennonite Central Committee has, in partnership with other agencies, agreed to co-sponsor several Syrian families who have been approved, but we are still waiting for them to arrive. Our church is supporting this project. Like Joseph, we know that strangers may arrive at any time. Will you be ready to receive them when they come?

Does waiting in Advent look like Joseph's preparing to raise or foster a child? Hosting God-with-us is not like hosting a traveler or a guest who will politely leave when the holidays are over. Emmanuel will live with you, observe you, and reflect you back to yourself. Just like a child, Emmanuel will show you who you really are. But God-with-us will not just reveal you. Like a child, Emmanuel will change and shape your identity, so that you are no longer your own, but you belong to an Other. Are you waiting to expose your whole life and identity to Emmanuel?

Or does waiting in Advent threaten to disrupt your life like it did Joseph's? Perhaps you are hesitant to slow down and wait, because you aren't sure you want to make room for Emmanuel. The birth of God-with-us affected Joseph's entire identity. It transformed him from a host into a stranger, and it may radically disrupt your life as well. It may put you at risk, require you to leave your place of comfort, or flee for safety. Or perhaps you are already in turmoil. The birth of God-with-us may disrupt the chaos of your life, bringing the blessings of peace, wholeness, and restored relationships. As you wait in Advent, are you prepared to be disrupted?

Waiting looks different for each of us. What does waiting look like for you? And who are the strangers that we need to welcome?