

Waiting
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The ancient hymn, The Akathistos, meaning *the one who is seated*, is a hymn to Mary, called the mother of Jesus, used in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is written in the now dead language Ancient Greek. This was also the first language that the Christian New Testament was written in. When I was in divinity school, I read the hymn in Greek and then me and a bunch of my friends danced it out. I will spare you both and skip right to the English but please close your eyes and imagine the music and dance of this hymn.

An angel of the first order, an arch angel, was sent from heaven to the bearer of god, Theotokos, to say: Rejoice! And with voice belonging to the unembodied one, he stood outside of himself in ecstasy, and he stood crying out to her:

Hail, you through whom joy will shine forth.

Hail, you through whom ruin will come to an end.

Hail, the redemption of the tears of Eve.

Hail, the height that cannot be scaled by human reason.

Hail, the depth that cannot be looked upon even by the eyes of angels.

Hail, because you possess the seat of a king.

Hail, because you endure all that is to be endured.

Hail, you through whom the creation is made new.

Hail: you through whom the creator is becoming a baby.

Mary is said to have been 14 at this time. Can you imagine such an experience? One might get a little heady after such an interaction I imagine. But in this story Mary does not grow arrogant and she is not hospitalized for insanity.

Mary grows ready.

Many people contest whether an angel came to Mary and whether she was a virgin or not when she birthed Jesus. I think this matters for many women, especially, who need Mary to be good and human, beautiful and desirable, strong and accessible. And there are others, women included, who defend Mary's virginity and find it a necessary component of Jesus' life story.

I cannot know the truth. I stand with Joseph Campbell who says that myths matter not because they are true or untrue but because they allow us certain possibilities of belief and action, they ground us in stories that we can fashion our own lives around and they open us to meaning making in our own lives. I think the myth of Mary, using myth in these ways, does all of these things very well.

Advent, which means arrival or approach, and includes the 4 Sundays that lead up to Christmas, is a pregnant waiting that is supposed to be lived in preparation of the

Christ *and* can also be about opening the space of waiting within us and naming it as holy time, as necessary time to become awake.

So how shall we wait in this time of darkness? And what do we wait for? Must we build a manger of sorts and cloister ourselves from the glaring eyes of others who stand in judgment of us as Joseph and Mary are said to have done? Or should we gather frankincense and mirth which for us is probably a good video and some cozy slippers? Or must we walk for miles following a star?

How can the story of Mary help us live into this waiting time that is the darkness, this waiting to return to what has been lost these past years, this waiting to know what comes next, this waiting to know who we will be next and what we can give up that is in our way and what we can still save?

How can we wait for the miracle of a future while living fully in the present?

And there is that word, miracle. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that a miracle is what is already present in life, all around us, if we are only attentive enough to notice. He says that if we need a miracle that is outside of nature to convince of us that the divine is in the world and in ourselves then we've missed the point.

So, where do we find the place of miracle, the conditions of miracle from which the practice of waiting becomes a holy time, not just a time of hoping for the outcomes we need?

Called by the Akathistos Hymn to this question, I have been reflecting on the conditions of a miracle and the sacred place of waiting, the soft and vulnerable place of waiting where I allow myself not to be bombarded by writing, reading, television or computer; where I do not make lists, plan the future or organize anyone else's life. That last one is really hard to let go of. Have you noticed what a mess everyone is when you are not telling them how to live their lives?

The act of waiting as a sacred act. Waiting invites stillness, a kind of sacred silence, that creates the grounds to hear the angel within ourselves awakened to tell us we are enough, that how we show up today, right this minute, matters essentially. That what we do with all that is around and is us matters more than all that is around and in us.

UU Minister Rev. Kate Brauestrup in her book *Here if You Need Me* offers another condition of a miracle. She writes that a miracle is not only an extraordinary event, which is of course subjective. As an aside here, I was fascinated to learn through my divinity school readings and lectures that many in Jesus' time were not overly moved by his healing of the sick or raising the dead.

There were many who walked about in Jesus' day proclaiming that they were the new prophet, the one the Hebrew Bible predicted would come as a savior. Many of these also healed the sick and raised the dead. I do not mean to diminish their works. The prophets of those days gave everything away and live in small, ramshackle encampments, without much food or warmth or shelter, listening for the word of god to come to them. Many of them did beautiful works of social justice. Indeed, it is through Judaism that the notion of social justice as sacred work was born.

Okay, back to the conditions of a miracle that Rev. Kate Brauestrup writes about. She tells us that a miracle is about a willingness to accept the good that is happening around us and know it as part of who we are...a miracle is about a willingness to accept the good that is happening around us and know it as part of who we are. When we can do this, then all the beauty we miss, all the love we miss, all the humanity we miss becomes visible and we become more human.

The conditions for the miracle that waiting allows, are about showing up with enough courage and stillness to hear the voice of our own soul, and then, right there, to humbly, simply, bow to the immense struggle of being human. Without pride or defeat, without arrogance or a humility that cripples us, we grant ourselves permission to sit in the pain and the beauty of life and just be there, with all of it, and see ourselves as we are and as we might still be. And this waiting, it is a time of gestation, the gestation of new meaning. And this is what myth of Mary reminds us. Of course, it also meant for Mary that God impregnated her as a single, unmarried, 14 year old woman. Must have been quite something to convince her betrothed Joseph of her fidelity!

We must wait with faith, using faith like a sled on a snow covered hill, faith like a glass of hot chocolate when we are shivering with the impossibility of being made of flesh and bones on a winter's day, faith like a blue sky when rain was expected, faith like rain that brings lightning and thunder, faith like love that happens even when we have not been loving in return.

And inside of this waiting, this soft trusting of life- meaning will be born like a child in a desert, against all odds, in the manger of our souls, nothing fancy, nothing ornate, just the stillness of the night and the breath of nature.

How we wait, with which words, with which actions and which breath, matters. How you wait creates the possibility of the future that we wait for. May we find the courage to allow the uncertainty that waiting bring, to grow our hearts and minds and souls so that when we get to the next horizon, we can see ourselves as part of it, and walk into it ready to give what it asks of us now.

Amen.