

The wait of an expectant mother is a long wait, with many anxious moments and sleepless nights. Clothes no longer fit. Often there is no way to relax or get comfortable. Expectant parents anguish over names, how to pay for college, and worry about car seats and pediatricians and godparents. But when that unborn life starts moving, or the doctors shows an image from the ultrasound ... it is difficult not to let the excitement of expectant joy overwhelm all else.

Isaiah spoke to people who had been trapped in Babylon for forty years. In many ways they were like expectant moms, waiting for their exile to end. Isaiah promised new life was coming. Now they were getting ready for the birth of something new and it was a little scary. How will we get home? How difficult will the journey be? What will be waiting for us when we get back to Jerusalem? How will we start all over again? And Isaiah said, “Forget the waiting and the worrying, celebrate the joy of this new life!”

Our Advent season is a similar time of waiting. We know Christmas is coming. And even though Jesus was born long ago, each year we attempt to celebrate his birth as if it is the first time we had ever heard such good news. And that is a good thing, for embracing such joy (as if we never had before) helps us appreciate what the world ignores or takes for granted. Advent is our time of expectant waiting -- and it is a good wait that we undertake. But sometimes we are distracted from the joy that this waiting is really all about.

In Old Testament Law, at the end of the seventh year, slaves were set free, and debts were cancelled. It was a “Sabbath year.” A year of joy and freedom and a new life. The anticipation of that “year of God’s favor” for those trapped in slavery or debt could be nothing less than expectant and unbridled joy. In the midst of our own worries and fears, Advent calls to a similar anticipation of joy.

Just as a husband and wife need time to prepare for the miracle of birth, and just as God’s children in Babylon needed time to prepare for the miracle of going home, so we need time to get ready for Christmas so that we are truly overwhelmed and respond with the wonder and awe that this miracle deserves.

In the beginning of Genesis there is a great line which is much like the mood of Isaiah: “In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep.” Right before “Creation,” when the darkness and chaos of precreation was about to be ended with the powerful “Let there be Light” that boomed into a new universe ... can you imagine the excitement and joy that would have been impossible to ignore, if there were any around to see what was coming next?

Parents remember the tension of anticipating a birth and the first moment the baby moved inside mother. Just consider how it feels to know that many surprises await a new Mom and Dad, yet that doesn’t keep them from joyfully moving forward. There is a trembling and a quaking in such expectant joy which is firmly grounded in the practical

of the real world but anticipates something new that will be so exciting and full of joy that it is hard to wait.

When I stop long enough to remember and wait expectantly for a gift even more fantastic than the lives of my children, I finally am getting ready. When I wait for a baby in the manger with the same anticipation that filled us as we waited for our babies to be born, I am on the right path.

Think about what is coming! A baby in a manger. A live birth that changes the face of creation for all time. This is the fulfillment of God's promise to be ONE with us, and in the birth of Messiah, our release from our debt to sin and our slavery to death will be erased, by the grace that birth brings.

We are getting ready for the birth that has changed our lives for all time. A birth powerful enough to light up the night sky. A birth promised long ago but one that we will continue to remember and celebrate for years to come.

What will help you feel that joy? What will help you now start to hear the angels sing? How can you shift your attention from the chores yet to be accomplished or the worries that get in the way of what is right before us? Advent helps us remember, with joy, what we are waiting for.

When we flew to Ireland, we were on an old plane, it smelled of aviation fuel they added with open doors just before we took off, the seats were cramped, and it was a long, uncomfortable flight. It seemed as if it would never end. There were times throughout the night I wondered whether it was worth it. And then we started our approach into Ireland, and we saw the Shannon River and green pastures and the agony of the flight was forgotten! As we got closer and closer the excitement of the journey returned and all pain was forgotten.

Every year's journey to Christmas is unique and each Christmas is different. There are always distractions, but the moment we are preparing for is at hand. Rather than cursing the darkness, we can choose instead to be filled with the impending joy. We are so close, now. How can we not already be changed by the birth that is at hand?

Advent is a wonderful journey. It calls us to wait for that baby in a manger just as Mary and Joseph did, as well as everyone else who has ever been warmed by the promise of a Messiah. It is all about waiting and what better way to wait than as we wait for a child to be born – for that is the only thing of importance in the days to come! It is OK to smile again, to hope, to feel the joy of grace. Prepare for your turn to be ushered into the joy of His birth!