

**From a Eulogy for Nelson Mandela
by President Barack Obama**

The questions we face today --
how to promote equality and justice;
how to uphold freedom and human rights;
how to end conflict and sectarian war --
these things do not have easy answers.

But there were no easy answers
in front of that child born in World War I.
Nelson Mandela reminds us
that it always seems impossible
until it is done.

South Africa shows that is true.
South Africa shows we can change,
that we can choose a world
defined not by our differences,
but by our common hopes.
We can choose a world defined not by conflict,
but by peace and justice and opportunity.

"When Are You Due?"

My Pregnancy

Thinking about Mary and her pregnancy
always brings me back to 5 years ago,
when I was pregnant with my son Peter.

Being the food lover that I am,
the minute I found out
that I was expecting a baby
I got to work eating -
for now, you see, I had an excuse
to delight in the junk food t
hat my sweet tooth craves.
Chocolate cake, lemon meringue pie, peanut butter balls, onion rings, -
you name it...I was eating it.

This meant that I began to show very early.
So for most of my pregnancy,
I was asked the question
"When are you due?"
multiple times a day.

Now, at first,
I was excited to share the news.
I would eagerly tell my due date to anyone who asked.
But after awhile,
I grew weary of the question
and I would answer "May the 4th"
almost without thought or enthusiasm.

Due Dates

"When are you due?"
or "When is the baby due?"
What a strange question,
when you think about it.

A due date makes you think of
bills needing to be paid
or an assignment needing to be handed it...
not so much about the grand entrance
of a brand new life into the world.

But we know what people mean when they ask this.
They mean,
when is your baby going to come into the world.
What is the day
when you will go to the hospital
for the labour and the delivery and the aftercare?
They mean it in a simple way
and perhaps sometimes they are just being polite
or making conversation even.

But really when you are waiting for a baby to be born,
you are waiting for a lot more than his or her arrival.

When are you due?
When is the moment
that your life is going to change completely?
When is the moment
that you will gain a whole new identity
and a brand new list of priorities?

When we wait for the birth of a baby - any baby -
we wait with great curiosity
to see what it will look like.
Will he or she have your mother's blue eyes?
Or what about that prominent family nose?
But we wait for so much more.

We wait to see who this little person will be,
who he or she will become,
what possibility lies in her or him,
how she or he will change - not just your world as a parent -
but *the* world as well.

Feelings

The whole experience
of being an expecting parent
is frightening
because you have this great responsibility
to mold this innocent child
into someone who will grow to be
kind and wise and generous.
You are tasked with giving them opportunities
and nurturing them.
So, it's scary.

But at the same time it is all terribly exciting.
You are filled with great hope for what is to come.
I imagine that Mary felt all of these things too
as she was waiting for her child to be born.
In fact, I know she did.
When she first discovered that she was pregnant,
fear was evident.
We hear about her
being troubled by the words
the angel spoke to her.
The angel even tries to calm her down
by telling her not to be afraid
and reassuring her that it would be alright.
But it didn't help
because she was utterly confused.

But there were positive feelings too.
We have this beautiful piece of writing
known as the Magnificat
or the Song of Mary
that we read together today.
In it, Mary is filled with an undeniable joy.
She sings about how great God is
and how she feels such gratitude in her soul.

So, filled with all these different feelings,
like any soon-to-be parent would be, Mary waits.
And we wait with her.

What Are We Waiting For?

Someone pointed out to me recently
how odd the season of Advent feels.
On the one hand,
we know we already have a Saviour
whose presence we feel in our lives,
but on the other, we spend an entire season
waiting for him to be born.
So he's here but not yet?
That doesn't quite make sense, does it?

It does make us wonder:
What are we waiting for anyway?
What is it that's due?
Is all of this Advent stuff, year after year,
really about us going back 2000 years
and pretending that Jesus has yet to be born.
Are we supposed to fill ourselves
with feelings of anticipation and wonder
just for the sake of dramatic effect?
Or is there something more to it...

I would say that those feelings we have
of peace and awe and joy are not acting.
They *are* real feelings.
But what we are waiting for is not, in fact,
an actual baby to be born;
We are waiting for hope to be born
and reborn into the world.

Like a pregnant mother or an expecting father,
we are waiting to see the birth of what is possible.
We are waiting for our lives to be changed,
perhaps turned upside down.
We are waiting to see what new life might look like.
We are waiting to see how the world can be changed
through seemingly simple, singular acts.
And we continually work on our part in all of this.

The image of a woman in labour works well here.
Bringing something new into being is hard work
and we would never make it through
if we didn't believe in the outcome,
if we didn't believe that something great would come
from the pain, from the sweat,
from the tears, from all the unpleasantness.

Mandela

Another image that works here is this one. [hold up Mandela image]
The image of Nelson Mandela.

Last Sunday at about this time, his funeral took place,
as he recently died at the age of 95.
And the remembering and celebrating of his life continues.

And why do you think it is that this one man
captured imaginations around the globe?
Could it be because he too birthed
so many new and wonderful things
into the world?

I'm sure most of us know the story by now.
Mandela was born into
a system of great inequality
in South Africa.
It was a country riddled with race problems
since the first white people came
and tried to conquer the black natives.

Apartheid certainly didn't help.
This was the social policy
which named whites as superior to blacks.
And this was the system that Mandela grew up in.

He spent his adult life fighting against it,
trying to bring about freedom and equality
and an end to oppression.
And we know that at the age of 44,
he went to jail for this
and there he remained for 27 years.

All the while,
he continued to be filled with hope
and he continued to work at bringing forth a new way.

After he was released,
he went on to be the President
and enacted changes that inspired the world.

Like Mary, Mandela laboured
and, like Mary,
he managed to birth light into darkness.
He worked at building justice and reconciliation until the end.

Conclusion

We wait for more of that:
For more of what Mary gave us in Jesus,
for more of what Mandela gave us in South Africa,
for more.

And that possibility is born
each time a new baby's cry rings out
for the very first time.

And that possibility continues to fill us -
no matter how old and tired
we might feel some days.

And that possibility is frightening and exciting;
it makes us anxious and hopeful at the same time.

Possibility might turn into beautiful reality
any time and any place.
It might and does materialize before our very eyes.
And it is indeed worth waiting for.

So, when are you due?
I don't know about you,
but I'm due for that right about now
and I think the world is too.

Let us now ready ourselves for such great birth.

Offertory Prayer

O Giver of many gifts,
as Christmas quickly approaches,
help us to continue to give all that we have.
We know that the needs of this world are many
but ask you to bless our humble gifts
that they may be enough.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of wonder,
we come before you in anticipation of what is to come.
We are excited.
We are fearful.
We are relieved.
We are uncertain.
In all these emotions, you are here with us.

God of no limits,
we give you thanks for the boundless gifts
you have given us:
this universe, which you have created with infinite mystery,
the church, which is the community of those who came before,
those who are here now, and those who are yet to come,
and new lives just begun.

God of wisdom and understanding,
just as Mary knew fear and uncertainty,
we, too, carry our worries and our fears in our hearts.
We pray for a time when this world might know peace.
We pray for a world without hunger and homelessness.
We pray for lives that never know tragedy.
We pray for countries untouched by greed.

Keep us ever-mindful for those who find the holiday season especially difficult.
Help us to understand the pain, grief, depression, and financial stress
that are very much present alongside the tinsel and lights.

God of wonder,
catch us by surprise this Christmas.
Fill us with the gifts of your grace and your love.
In the name of Jesus, your wonderful gift to us,
we pray: