



Prelude (Advent)

Week 3: Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming

Brian Mattson - 12/14/2025

Here we are, already on the third week of Advent. Halfway through December and only ten days from Christmas Eve. Do you feel fully engulfed in the hustle and bustle of the season? Have you made it through your first chaotic office party or trip to the mall or late night online shopping spree? At this point in December, we've remembered the hope and peace of the season. Today we observe the joy, but as the days speed by faster and faster, it starts to feel like anxiety. Or perhaps a more panicked version of joy.

It can be hard to experience *that* kind of joy. It's joy mixed with a bit of restraint and trepidation. It's like being told something down the road is going to be great, but you've still never been there before. A little like clicking up the track before the first big drop of your first rollercoaster ride. *I've heard this is a fun ride, but I'm a wee bit unsure right now.* Have you had those feelings? Even if you don't like rollercoasters, we've all experienced waiting for the unknown while people try to reassure us that things will be okay. New schools. New jobs. Newborns.

I remember when Jessica and I got pregnant with Jack. We were elated with the news, obviously, but soon thereafter came a season of questions and waiting, wondering and hoping. Everything was new and that meant everything was unknown. We downloaded the apps on our phones to understand how big the baby was each week as compared to a common fruit

or vegetable. *Oh wow! The baby is the size of a lime or Crazy! The baby is the size of a pineapple,* which, let's be honest... just sounds painful.

The app also featured developmental markers and descriptions about what was happening, not only to the baby, but also with the moms. Every time there was a change in our developmental timeline, Jessica and I would lay in bed and read the latest updates to our journey. We learned how the arms and legs, eyes and ears, organs and hair, were growing and changing in the baby. With little diagrams and illustrations, we imagined how that little kumquat was developing into a baby, hidden away in the womb.

We didn't have to use our imaginations to see the changes Jessica was undergoing physically. There were the obvious signs of pregnancy, sure, but there was a whole host of other... oh... problems isn't the right word... more like, surprises? There was a change to her appetite and smell sensitivity during that first trimester. That meant I needed to learn how to cook, and fast, if we wanted to continue eating. Jess didn't really want to eat. She pretty much stuck to oranges and Kraft macaroni & cheese, so I was the guinea pig for my own cooking experiments.

And as the spring turned into summer, there was the absolute uncomfortability of being pregnant in the summer heat. Her back hurt. Her ankles hurt. Her fingers hurt. Basically, all her joints hurt. To add insult to injury, it was also a notoriously sweltering summer, so she felt hot all the time. Hot and uncomfortable—the most enjoyable of all combinations.

Leading up to our pregnancy, I considered myself as knowledgeable as the next man in regards to female health and anatomy, that is to say woefully unlearned. But as I witnessed these changes, both physically and emotionally, I continued to consider myself blessed to be of the male variety. We have it so easy, ignorant of the true pains and struggles on the journey to motherhood.

One thing we did share along the way was the uneasiness of being pregnant for the first time. Each new scan and upcoming doctor appointment brought a wave of wondering and questions. And when you are full of questions in this modern age, we all turn to the internet, which is not only full of information, but also full of opinions. At times it's hard to separate the two. The forums on the baby app helped assuage some fears, but unlocked a myriad of others. Sometimes, we would get unsolicited advice or stories from people in public, which always made for... um... interesting conversations? Well intentioned always, but reassuring rarely. Still, we journeyed on from kumquat to apple and up to a small watermelon. And when Jack arrived, the joy was palpable, bubbling up from inside of us, escaping through our eyes and smiles and tears. Thick enough to pluck from the air and put in our pockets to enjoy later. But the journey to get to those first few moments were a paradox: expectantly waiting and endlessly wondering.

When I think of our pregnancy story and try to imagine Mary's journey to baby Jesus, I'm sure she endured much of the same. I'm sure she was full of questions, excitement, doubts, fears, fun, frustrations, and joy. A mixture of the good, bad, and in between of life.

Our Advent song for today is *Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming*. Its lyrics speak to this paradoxical nature of this season before Christmas. A rose blooming in the dormant season. A flower in the desert. A light in the dark of night.

**Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.**

This is probably one of the lesser-known songs of the season, but its words paint a beautiful picture of Mary's role in this story. A blooming rose to signal the Incarnation of God in the form of Jesus. The paradox continues through the ideas of human and divine, hope in a time of exile, and Catholics and Protestants. Wait, what? Yes, there was, or is, debate about who these lyrics were actually about, Mary or Jesus.

This song comes from the 16th century, not long after the Protestant Reformation. But the lyrics were found in a Catholic monastery in the city of Cologne, Germany. So the history of the song also includes the debate about whether the words of the song are meant to describe the Virgin Mary or Jesus, the messiah.

The original lyrics of the second verse seem to be conclusive, but the English translation by Theodore Baker muddies the water. In music, just as in scripture, translations and interpretation are part of our history. Here's how we sing the lyrics today in the common English translation.

**Isaiah 'twas foretold it, The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it, The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright, She bore to men a Savior,
When half spent was the night.**

But the original German, the Mary-centric version, sounds like this:

**The little rose I speak of, of which Isaiah prophesied,
is Mary the pure, who brought us the little flower.
By God's eternal decree, she bore a child and remained a pure
virgin.**

It sure seems like the original author was giving us the answer. These words are about Mary. However, the more Lutheran amongst us might argue that Mary is simply tending the rose, I suppose. Regardless, a third verse has since been added to muddle the original meaning and lend more credence to the Jesus argument.

**This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load**

Perhaps this verse ties the whole thing together, as it rings with the contradiction of a life of faith in the season of Advent. Light in the darkness. Human and divine. Life from death. A heavy burden that feels lighter. Advent itself is a time of looking back thankfully, while at the same time expectantly peering into the future for the better things to come, a time of *shalom*—wholeness—as Heather talked about last week. To have faith in our modern, scientific world is its own kind of paradox, right? We are a people of faith in a time when seeing is believing.

Many of the allusions in this song are pulled from the Book of Isaiah, where so many of the Messianic prophecies live. In Isaiah 11, we read the words predicting a future king to rule a peaceful kingdom.

**A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.**

- Isaiah 11:1

This verse ties the future king of Israel to the royal lineage of King David, as Jesse is David's father. The rose imagery in the song comes later in Isaiah 35.

**The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall
rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting.**

- Isaiah 35:1-2

And the word *crocus* here is often translated or understood to be a Rose of Sharon or desert rose, hence the lyrics in the song.

The early Christians saw these prophetic words of Isaiah fulfilled in the birth of Jesus by his mother, Mary. These words, which meant something different to the people they were originally written for, were a continuation of the story about God participating with humanity. A story about God's solidarity with humankind. A story about a pregnant young woman, carrying a new kind of king.

Later, in the New Testament, Paul carries the pregnancy metaphor into the future. Just as the ancient Israelites longed for a new kind of king, and the exiled faithful yearned to return to their homeland, all of creation pines for renewal and redemption.

Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is awakening us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

- Romans 8:22-25 MSG

In the waiting, in the now, our joyful expectancy grows. We, like Mary, are full of anticipation for the promises yet to come. But still, our hearts and minds are racing with wonderings and what-ifs. We are suspended in this paradox of looking into the future even as we celebrate the past. Sometimes it feels like we are stuck in the unknown of the present. Our anxiety about the world around us, our deficiencies as friends, parents, teachers, pastors—all these things can cause us to stand still.

But the answer to these doubts and fears is not to stop. It is to move forward towards joy. Because even in the waiting, we must continue to do good things. We still give gifts, send cards, and make plans even though we don't know what the future holds. We do these things as a testament to our faith, even when it seems frail, because we do trust that love wins. We trust that Jesus does come again and that what is wrong will be made right, what is broken will be made whole, and what is separated will be gathered up again.

Perhaps this season has been marked by real sadness and all you truly can see is the wrongs and the broken and the torn apart. The joy of Christmas doesn't magically wipe those things away. Sometimes, though, it's good to remember and recall that there is very real joy in this world. And as we move through time as people of faith, all our pain, adversity, sadness, and struggles will eventually be overtaken by joy. It's perfectly normal to live with the paradox of joy in the sadness. But we will not stay there forever.

Even now, there is work to do. A world waking up to the call of a gardener who has tasked us all with scattering seeds of hope. We begin by tilling the soil and preparing the ground so that new shoots can grow up around us. The work we do now in the waiting, in the hesitant expectation like that of the pregnant Mary, is equal parts celebrating the past and looking to the future. We are people with eyes for the joy that will come, and hearts for the work on the journey now. Behold, a rose is blooming whose fragrance fills the air and its light dispels the darkness. It is spirit and flesh, and the joy it brings lightens every load.