



Invitation

The season of Advent affords us the opportunity to remember, express, and anticipate the coming of Christ. We remember the humble birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we express the spirit of Christ in our lives, and we anticipate a future coming of Christ and the fulfillment of God's reign.

This self-guided Advent retreat isn't about adding another thing to your holiday schedule. It's about creating space to experience the sacred and make meaning from this remarkable and challenging time. On Tuesday mornings during Advent, there will be a link to the week's retreat featuring a selection of music, artwork, reflection, and poetry written and curated by a different GC|RH community member in response to the theme of expectancy.

The writers invite you to explore their reflections as an opening into a deeper conversation with the breadth and depth of human experience and to cultivate a posture of curiosity towards these themes as they emerge in us, in others, and in the world around us.

Preparation

If possible, set aside a time in the day that is free from distractions. Take a few moments to prepare your space. You may want to gather a few items, such as a candle, journal, or other symbolic elements, that encourage contemplation and reflection. Feel free to adjust these materials to suit your needs and your landscape.





Madonna del Magnificat by Sandro Botticelli

Week One: “The Emergence of Expectancy” by Neal Halvorson-Taylor

Songs

Magnificat; Cantata No. 80 by Johann Sebastian Bach

Forever Young by Bob Dylan

Reading from Psalm 85

Restore us again... revive us again...

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,

for she will speak peace to her people,
to her faithful, to those who turn to her in their hearts.

Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

Righteousness will go before her,
and will make a path for her steps.

“I dwell in Possibility – (466)” by Emily Dickinson

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars -
Impregnable of eye -
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky -
Of Visitors - the fairest -
For Occupation - This -
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise -

Reflection

The word expectation suggests anticipating something good on the horizon. We consider and juggle many expectations as we make our way through each day—a gift to open; food for dinner; the sunrise; a better job. Expectations can be realistic; others live in the realm of fantasy. Some are met. Many fall short. Expectations cheer; expectations can disappoint.

In contrast, expectancy is an active condition. It means investing oneself in something that has potential without attachment to a particular outcome. It means a faith in the fruition of that something that goes beyond any end product. It's trust in a reality that is not yet but will come to pass. It is the heart's yearning for deeper dimensions, without knowing or envisioning yet what that might be. It captures the vulnerable desire for something thought to be unattainable. It is, using Maya Angelou's words, "the pulse of this new day" with its fresh possibilities. It is the sustaining energy necessary for cathedral building. It is the attention that becomes devotion to a beautiful reality larger than the self and beyond the scope of our all-too-often circumscribed imaginations. It is that compassionate resilience that emerges out of the cycles of angst and grief, a resilience that clings tenaciously to the beauty of living. I think Emily Dickinson knew expectancy when she dwelled "in Possibility," as did the psalmist in imagining the place where "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet" and knowing that "righteousness and peace will kiss each other."

Pregnant Mary sings in her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), of another kind of expectancy, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior." And she envisions the real possibility of a transformed society in which God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones" and "has lifted up the lowly," in which God has "filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." Mary invests her whole self and body in this potent expectancy of God's reign, the inauguration of which is the birth of her child and his death on the cross. In the above image of Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat*, Mary writes the lyrics of her song. Her left hand holds her son's hand, her right hand holds a pomegranate, a symbol of her son's suffering, death, and new life in the planting of its red seeds.

During my sabbatical, I wrestled a bit with expectations and came to a new appreciation for the condition of expectancy. In its first month, I was very much aware of my father's precarious health. I was in daily contact with my mother and sister, who were taking care of him. And, on many occasions, I Facetimed my father who had taken a great interest in my Norway sojourn, especially the visit I made to the farm on which his grandmother was raised.

I spent the first four weeks of my sabbatical in the rural regions of Norway. Near the end of July, Martien and our children and I met at Welhavens gate 18, the address of an Airbnb apartment in Oslo. We had expectations for fun on our visit to the capital city. We walked several miles visiting the Operahuset (Opera House), Vigeland Park, the Harbor Promenade, eating open face sandwiches with smoked salmon and

gravelax, local strawberries, Freia chocolate bars, and drinking non-alcoholic beer—my favorite new drink of which Norway had many offerings. The weather was delightful. The city was packed with pedestrians, cyclists, and sunbathers. Expectations fulfilled. While we were in Oslo, my mother called to report that my father had had a remarkable day: he ate well, spent a few hours sitting up, and enjoyed conversation. I was relieved and happy. The next day, my sister called. The news was bleak. Our father's health had taken a 180-degree turn. The hospice nurse confirmed that he was near death. He died two days later. It was late afternoon in Oslo. We were stunned.

I had no expectations that my father would recover. He and I had talked about the very real possibility of his death before I left on sabbatical, a tough and tear-filled conversation. I had considered changing my itinerary, but he argued against doing so. My father's death was a good death. He was almost 91 years old. He had lived a good life. In Ancient Greek, the word for death is *telos* which can also mean completion. My father had completed his life. His death was expected. What I didn't expect was a different sort of feeling to emerge within me, a feeling I have felt in the past and one that came on stronger and clearer than I can recall.

I associate the word expectancy with pregnancy, probably because of the popular pregnancy book, *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. But this feeling I was having was mixed up with death. There was a sense that my father's death altered my perspective on life in some way. I felt the sting of grief. I shed tears when I told others about his death. And, at the same time, I felt an inner surge of gratitude. And a strength that could be characterized as assurance, trust, acceptance. I wrote my father's obituary and the funeral sermon buoyed by expectancy. I had no expectations regarding him, the funeral, my sabbatical time, or family and friends. What I had was a feeling of letting go and living into the present with more awareness, with a greater appreciation for existence and the love that gives that existence energy and purpose. I was feeling an expectancy in the ultimate goodness of life, a fresh and, paradoxically, seasoned investment in life's possibilities. May the Spirit infuse you with possibility, imagination, and faith, all bundled together in expectancy.

Prayer

Holy, ineffable, engaging God, draw us inward and fill us with good things. Lift and revive us, for you are life itself. You are the love that permeates all things. You are the light that dawns in the bleakest corners of our hearts and minds, the light that reveals goodness, strength, and beauty amid the many tragedies we face. Fill us with expectancy, gracious One, that we not only endure the struggles but that we persevere with patience and a resolve to give ourselves to your compassionate reign. Amen.

Questions for Further Thought:

I encourage you to keep some time of silence. As you do so, speak the word expectancy, let it roll off your tongue. Allow it space within you. Does it name a reality within yourself that you already feel? Does it give that reality a name? From where does your expectancy come? Do you draw on it when life's burdens become heavy, when frustration and heartache meet instead of righteousness and peace? Are there ways in which you can cultivate expectancy?



Nativity by He Qi

Week Two: “Waiting for the World to Change” by Ashley Hurst

Song

[Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus](#), words by Charles Wesley, sung by Ashley Spurling/Red Mountain Music

Reading “The Magnificat” or Prayer of Mary, [inclusive language version](#)

My soul gives glory to the Lord,
rejoicing in my saving God,
who looks upon me in my state,
and all the world will call me blest;
For God works marvels in my sight,
and holy, holy is God's name.
God's mercy is from age to age,
on those who follow in fear;
Whose arm is power and strength,
and scatters all the proud of heart;
Who casts the mighty from their thrones
and raises up the lowly ones!
God fills the starving with good things,
the rich are left with empty hands;
Protecting all the faithful ones,
remembering Israel with mercy,
the promise known to those before
and to their children forever!

“Expectancy – the feeling that something exciting or pleasant is going to happen.”
-Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary

Reflection

On November 16, 2022, Cooper Takeshi Hurst entered the world, blessing my youngest brother and sister-in-law with a long-awaited child. They have been hoping and trying for over 7 years. As joyous as Cooper’s long-awaited birth is to our family, this advent—the season of preparation for the long-expected Christ child—I keep returning to my brother and sister-in-law’s years of waiting, not knowing if there would ever be a Cooper. And all those still waiting for their Coopers to be born or the birth of other longed-for dreams.

Each Advent, I struggle with the frenetic exuberance and celebration of Jesus’s birth, and what his long-expected birth was supposed to bring into the world. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:44-56), Mary sings of her gratitude for God’s blessings, but also of the expectancy she and those praying for a messiah had for God’s reign on earth- a new world order, the toppling of the oppressive powers of human rulers, for a divine one who would bring justice to all. For millennia, we have recited Mary’s song to capture and reignite the feeling that something exciting is about to happen in our celebration of Jesus’ birth. I feel this expectancy most when singing the [Canticle of Turning](#), a 1990 song reimagining of the Magnificat set to a lively Irish folk tune.

And yet, we cannot ignore that, despite Mary’s clarion call for justice for all and the millions of believers over the millennia holding on to her expectancy of the long-expected Prince of Peace, we are still waiting. How do we keep waiting in hopeful expectancy year after year (or millennia after millennia) for an end to the wars we wage across the face of the earth and in our own hearts?

I never asked my brother directly whether they thought of giving up. Anyone who has lived through multiple disappointments and despair knows that thoughts of giving up are normal, and sometimes even healing. Letting go of a longed-for dream can open us up to new dreams. And yet, when I think of Mary and her longed-for dream of peace and justice, a world where the hungry are fed good things and the lowly exalted, I find myself reluctant to let go of her expectancy. The world she sings of is the one I want to live in, and I want Cooper to grow up in. I want to believe that the world is about to turn- turn towards more peace and more justice. And so, this advent, I again wait in expectancy for the long-expected Jesus to be born anew in my heart, excited by the possibilities of a world about to change.

Prayer

Come, thou Long-Expected Jesus, to live afresh in us this Advent, to redeem our disappointments and despairs, to share in our joyous moments, and turn us and the world towards your peace and justice. Amen.

Questions for Further Reflection:

What are the long-expected and waited for dreams and desires in your life? How have they become reality this year? And how have they not? How can we manifest Mary’s song of peace and justice in the coming year? What ways do you have to keep the hopeful expectancy alive?



Peaceable Kingdom by John August Swanson

Week Three: “Doorknobs and Doorways” by Stephen Hitchcock

Songs

[Magnificat](#) Arvo Pärt, Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Paul Hillier

[Jane Jane](#) (trad.) Bonny Light Horsemen

Reading from Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the

kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

“Nativity” by Li-Young Lee

In the dark, a child might ask, *What is the world?*
just to hear his sister
promise, *An unfinished wing of heaven,*
just to hear his brother say,
A house inside a house,
but most of all to hear his mother answer,
One more song, then you go to sleep.

How could anyone in that bed guess
the question finds its beginning
in the answer long growing
inside the one who asked, that restless boy,
the night's darling?

Later, a man lying awake,
he might ask it again,
just to hear the silence
charge him, *This night*
arching over your sleepless wondering,

this night, the near ground
every reaching-out-to overreaches,

just to remind himself
out of what little earth and duration,
out of what immense good-bye,

each must make a safe place of his heart,
before so strange and wild a guest
as God approaches.

Reflection

I've been thinking quite a bit about expectancy, specifically in the context of The Haven. I finished my tenure as executive director and chaplain this past June. At Neal's suggestion, I applied for a fellowship through Virginia Humanities to write about The Haven as well as the larger realities of homelessness. The fellowship officially began in October. It's been a lovely way to transition out of that remarkable community. I thought I'd share a couple of excerpts from the preface, both of which touch upon the theme of expectancy.

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1

Maybe you've noticed the way certain old doorknobs seem to glow, as if lit from within, almost warm to the touch. They hum with rumor and memory, having accumulated a kind of presence over generations of use: polished and worn by thousands of hands of every color, size, and shape. When I think of The Haven, I don't immediately think of an organization or people or even a location, I think of a doorknob. A missing doorknob, to be exact. It opens a narrow door to an equally narrow, and steep, balcony staircase in the foyer of a sanctuary.

What is now The Haven, a day shelter and multi-resource center for people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, was originally a church, the historic Church of Christ, built in 1837. Like so many old Southern churches, its architecture mirrors its dehumanizing theology. You see, this staircase led to a balcony for enslaved peoples. A congregation within the congregation. Separate; not equal. They were to be present but out of sight, out of the way. Visible invisibility. A circumstance Haven guests know all too well. The Haven continues to be a place where people congregate, a disproportionate number of whom, it cannot be ignored, are people of color. The historical continuity should harrow us. No longer a church, it still provides sanctuary.

The doorknob felt good in my hands, the right heft. Circular with a nearly flat face, not rounded at the edges, the wood scored with grooved rings to make it easier to grip, I presume. I haven't held another doorknob like it. Old and simple, easy to unscrew. I unscrewed it many times; I liked holding it. Others must have too because one day it wasn't there. We didn't replace it. To open the door you have to grip the metal threads of what amounts to a large, hollow bolt—a doorknob with no knob. It's difficult and uncomfortable to turn. People stuff it with gum wrappers.

My favorite writer is the Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer. Not a household name outside of Sweden, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2011, just four years before his death in 2015, at the age of eighty-four. He worked as a prison psychologist for much of his career. I don't really need a reason to bring him up (he's always close by), but that doorknob recalls a stanza from *Baltics*, his long, autobiographical poem:

I stand with my hand on the door handle, take the pulse of the house.
The walls so full of life
(the children won't dare sleep alone up in the attic—what makes
me feel safe makes them uneasy.)

Sometimes we pause before entering to take “the pulse” of a place, or to take our own pulse. Like portals doorknobs whisk us in an instant back into the past or forward into the future, only to return us to ourselves, a little lighter or heavier, fuller, with a nearly imperceptible shock.

2

Before my college roommate's mom became Head of School at a private, Christian school, she was a teacher. Her name is Marnie. Scarily smart, no nonsense. I adore her though we haven't spoken in years. I wanted to please and impress her, which I felt self-conscious about. Our interactions thrilled me. I manufactured questions while her blue eyes sparkled, admixture of intensity and kindness. Never severe, always incisive,

like the great-great grandmother in *The Princess and the Goblin*, who lived hidden in the attic, surviving on pigeon eggs.

On this occasion, Marnie and I were chatting about predestination. That's right, predestination: divine foreknowledge. More specifically the theological implications of divine foreknowledge on humankind (a little small talk between Presbyterians). The doctrine of predestination, in a nutshell, holds that God knows everything past, present, and future. Questions arise: If God knows all that will happen, do humans have freewill? If humans have free will, does that create a knowledge gap in God's omniscience? A hard nut to crack. Presbyterians love talking about it.

As a nod to the mystery of human free will and divine foreknowledge, Marnie told me she placed two signs above her classroom doorway, one outside, visible from the hallway, the other inside, visible once inside the classroom. Before entering her students might look up and read: *Please come in*; then upon entry might look back to read: *I knew you would come*. I don't spend much time contemplating predestination these days, but I like Marnie's wager. What intrigues me is not what or who is outside or inside, rather the threshold itself. That placeless place, full of possibility. That's where the mystery lives.

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Our hearts are thresholds. The season of Advent invites us to invite God in. May we make a safe place of our hearts *before so strange and wild a guest as God approaches*.

Prayer

God of timeless grace, you fill us with joyful expectation. Make us ready in heart, mind, and spirit, that with uprightness of heart and embodied joy we may eagerly await the birth of your son, Jesus. Amen.

Questions for further thought

What do the seasons—the earth, the air, our local trees, and animals—have to teach us about expectancy and readiness? Take half an hour to sit outside, to watch and listen. Leave your phone in your house or in your car. There is so much patient work being done, so much needful preparation taking place around us all the time. What can our hearts learn?



The Annunciation of a Woman by Harmonia Rosales

Week Four: “Stories We Tell” by Joanna Currey

Songs

[“Do You Hear Merry Gentleman”](#) by The Nervous Gregorians

[“Whither Must I Wander”](#) by Maddy Prior & the Carnival Band

Reading from Luke 1:26-38 (NRSVUE)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

“Annunciation Under Erasure” by Mary Szybist

And he came to her and said
The Lord is

troubled
in mind

be afraid Mary

The Holy
will overshadow you
therefore

be

nothing be impossible

and Mary said

And the angel departed from her

Reflection

Honestly, when I started thinking about the concept of expectancy, my first thought was anxiety. This, of course, says a lot about me. Though the word expectancy contains multitudes, one limitation it appears to have is that it implies an orientation toward the future. And when I think about the future, I think about my future, and when I think about my future, I think about all the ways life’s swirling vortex of personal choices and external circumstances has already failed to create the life I expected for myself. Naturally, it’s difficult to imagine the future being all that different.

In October, my four-year relationship with the only person I’ve ever felt rather likely to marry came to an amicable but heartbreaking end. In the unfortunately timed holiday and darkest-months-of-the-year aftermath, I’ve noticed myself oscillating between regret for the ways I personally failed the relationship, and anger for the ways our circumstances and relational eco-systems undermined and invalidated the relationship. (The lowdown: long-distance; queer relationship; conservative families and communities of origin; society as a whole—you get it.) This is a potent manifestation of the way I seem to metabolize all my life’s disappointments. I have it both ways: I’m angry that I’m a victim of my circumstances, and I beat myself up for not doing more, doing better. Unsurprisingly, that muddy emotional cocktail doesn’t exactly act as a tonic for anxiety.

Reflecting on this reminded me of the Serenity Prayer, made famous by Alcoholics Anonymous. Like many oft-quoted passages, I’ve more or less known the words for a long time without really engaging with their meaning. But this season of my life has shed new light on their aptness and insight:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

It seems I struggle to embody any of these virtues. After all, it would be difficult to live in daily existential anxiety if I really accepted my identity and circumstances rather than dwelling in “what if” scenarios, had the courage to act and live with intentionality rather than fear-laden inaction, and had the wisdom to discern my agency and limitations while being gentle with myself in the process. This feels like my work for this particular season, but also my lifelong work. Regardless of my approach, life is happening, so why not nurture abundance and fulfillment rather than resentment? Which, if you can believe it, brings me to the question of Mary.

During the season of Advent, I perennially wrestle with what to think about Mary’s story. I grew up in a biblically inerrantist, staunchly Protestant church where we were taught not to make too much of Mary for fear of idolizing her like those pesky Catholics do. When Mary was talked about, it was during Advent, and in the Advent sermons I heard growing up, I was taught to admire her for her purity of heart (and, implicitly, of body) and, most of all, for the apparently seamless alignment of her will with God’s. Her worth came from her ability to immediately, wholeheartedly submit.

It wasn’t until I got into the poetry of recovering Catholic eldest daughters almost certainly named after the holy virgin mother that this story about Mary, which I never found particularly inspiring, was incisively troubled for me. In “Annunciation under Erasure” Mary Szybist writes, “be afraid Mary / The Holy / will overshadow you / therefore / be / nothing.” Szybist uses the annunciation passage itself to reveal a subversive, darker interpretation of the annunciation story that highlights Mary’s powerlessness in this situation.

And for anyone who has ever felt helpless, felt like their life was being irrevocably changed, disrupted, or appropriated by irresistibly powerful forces, this version of the story might resonate a lot more than the “joyous submission” version. After all, as I was growing up, no one brought up the fact that the English language Bible translations we used all quoted the angel Gabriel as saying “you will” or “you shall.” Mary isn’t actually given a choice. Doesn’t that undermine the nobility of her assent to being divinely impregnated with the son of God a little bit? What’s the value in agreeing to something that’s going to happen either way? How can there be meaningful consent in situations of such cosmic power imbalance?

I want to acknowledge that I think interpreting this as a story about power, violation, and co-opting a young woman’s life is valid and complete.

However, like a good poet and a good church kid, I’m not quite satisfied by this interpretation, just like I’m not satisfied by the “joyous submission” one. What I’m after is something a little more nuanced, with a sermon-esque redemptive ending.

Viewed through the framework of the Serenity Prayer, I think Mary can transcend both the roles of submissive vessel and optionless victim. Something like this:

Mary has the serenity to accept the fate imposed upon her, the courage to exercise choice where she can—in this case, how she responds to receiving that fate—and the wisdom to understand both the burden and beauty of having a grand, terrifying destiny.

In other words, she recognizes that she can't stop the bull, but her agency lies in grabbing it by the horns and saying, "Ok, fine, let's do this." To me, this is an aspirational Mary. This is the Mary I want to emulate. Still, I think there's something yet deeper going on here, something that edges beyond the scope of the prayer. In the beginning of the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise that follows shortly after the annunciation scene in the first chapter of Luke, Mary says,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed. (Luke 1:46-48, NRSVUE)*

In the ESV Bible translation—the translation used to preach the “joyful submission” version of Mary to me—her assertion is even stronger: “For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” Notice her use of the verb “will.” Like Gabriel, the celestial messenger of her maternal fate, Mary leaves no room for debate in her pronouncement about how her story will ultimately pan out. Though, unlike most of us, she's told ahead of time what her life's most pivotal event will be, there's much she still doesn't know about how it will happen, what it will feel like, who else will be there, and what else she might need to give up along the way. Nevertheless, Mary abides not in anxiety for the future, but in expectancy of a beautiful, blessed life. Her wise and well-ordered relationship with her own agency manifests most powerfully in what she chooses to believe about her own story.

Wallace Stevens wrote, “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.” I like to think (I choose to think) that he means “fiction” not in the sense of “an objectively untrue thing,” but rather in the sense of the word's more subtle etymology: “a fashioning or feigning,” “to shape,” “to build,” “to knead, form out of clay.” Basically, as I read it: nothing is truly knowable, nothing can demand our belief beyond any doubt or uncertainty, and the final belief is to consciously choose to believe in something—meaning, an order to the universe, a shape, a form, a good story—anyway. This is why Mary can say, “all generations will call me blessed.” This is why I spring for redemptive endings.

Recently, a dear friend bashfully suggested I try writing down three things I'm grateful for every night before going to sleep. “I know it sounds cheesy,” they said, “but shifting my focus like that actually really helped me through a dark time.” There are many ways to understand stories, many angles to explore and valid versions to weigh, whether those stories are about Mary, God, history, technology, the future of our planet, or our own small lives. And anxiety about breakups, jobs, fraught family relationships, and struggling to imagine an exciting future is and always will be a part of life. But we can hold a more expansive expectancy than anxiety. We can dwell in possibility, hope for a better world, embrace liminal spaces, and choose how to tell stories, knowing that the versions we choose have the power to shape the fabric of our reality. What I mean is, maybe I can make choices, cultivate belief in a fiction, that allows me to call myself, my own story, blessed.

Prayer

God grant us the serenity, courage, and wisdom to live in expectancy of a beautiful story.

Questions for further thought:

Author and researcher Brené Brown writes about using the phrase “The story I’m telling myself is…” as a relational tool. In the heat of conflict, it can be easy to level accusations at whoever we feel is causing us pain, or to state our perception of a situation as fact. But Brown suggests that, especially in instances of conflict with people who we know love us, there is a high likelihood that we have an incomplete picture of what’s transpired. So instead of approaching them with statements like, “You said this” or “You did that,” we can preface our statements with “The story I’m telling myself is…” which allows us to explain our experience of feeling hurt while creating space for the other person to share their experience as well.

I think this relational tool can be equally useful when it comes to our relationships with ourselves. What are the stories you’re telling yourself about yourself? Consider writing some of them down. How does it feel to put those stories into words? Does the act of writing them change how true or untrue they seem? What kinds of stories would a friend or loved one tell about you, and how do those compare with your own stories?