

Under Wraps – God is Expectant

November 27, 2016

Luke 1: 34-45

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. ³⁶ Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God!" ³⁸ Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her.

³⁹ A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. ⁴⁰ She went into Zechariah's home, where she greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her. The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. ⁴² Then in a loud voice she said to Mary: "God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. ⁴³ Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. ⁴⁵ The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise."



Have you ever counted down the days? Have you ever put a date on the calendar or into your mental memory and ticked off the days as the date approached? For me, Christmas is much like that. For me, many others dates have been like that too – my sixteenth birthday, graduation from school, my wedding, the birth of a child.

You too have dates like these. You too have experienced the agony of waiting for these dates to arrive. And you too have had dates like the woman in our video. There was a date hanging out there, and as you ticked off the days, it was not a joyous sense of expectancy that built in you. Maybe it was the date of an upcoming surgery or the date that you had to be out of the place you were renting or the date that your last child would head off to college or the date that the place you were working would close its door forever. Expectancy can be joyous. And expectancy can be hard. As we gather today on the edge of Advent, may our expectancy be joyous as we begin to count down the days until we celebrate the birth of Christ. In case you are wondering, that number would be twenty-eight. Let us pray.



⁶ A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.



⁷ His power will never end; peace will last forever. He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong. He will always rule with honesty and justice.



The Lord All-Powerful will make certain that all of this is done.

We read this Isaiah passage through the lens of the New Testament. We read this passage and we see Jesus. But think for a moment how this passage would have been read before Jesus came. When it was read in 200 B.C. or even 1 B.C., it was a passage full of hope and promise. It was a passage with expectancy.



I believe we are often tempted to think we have things all figured out. In life, we like to know what we are doing tomorrow and the next day. We like to put dates on the calendar and we tend to plan for things. We have our short-term and our long-term goals and we make our plans. Woe to the one who disrupts any of these! In our faith, we are much the same way. Go to church on Sunday, pray each night before bed, show up to our meeting, buy an item for the Food Pantry. Check, check, check. And we know the story – Jesus came, lived, died, was resurrected. So, for the most part, we already know what God has done and we think we know what God is doing in our life. But do we? Do we ever leave room to be surprised by God?

Take, for example, your prayer life. It can be so easy to fall into a rut, to simply follow those set prayer patterns day after day. *"Dear Lord, be with Kristin and my mom and dad and Ray; be with Matt and Alex and Sam and Abby..."* It is the same prayer day after day. And there are occasional additions that will be a part of the routine for a while. Prayers for this family who has lost a loved one or for that person who is having surgery or for this person battling cancer. You know the pattern. I pray for set things and specific people because it is safe, it is consistent, it is reliable. But what would happen if we prayed expectantly, leaving room for surprise? What would happen if our prayers left a time and space for God? What would happen if we prayed, *"God, speak to me this day. Tell me what you want me to do today. God, lead me to whom and where you want me to serve you today"*? What might happen if we prayed this and then left time and space for God to respond? What might happen?





In the passage from Luke today, Mary and Elizabeth each find themselves preparing for a baby they hadn't expected. Hear again the opening line from Mary, "*How can this happen? I am not married!*" You can hear the genuine doubt and maybe

even some confusion in Mary's voice. Elizabeth had her own doubts and questions too. We've all our own had Mary-and-Elizabeth moments when we've thought we were too old, too young, or too whatever. We've all heard the whisper or felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit and have said, "What?" or "Who, me?" Here we need to take our cue from Mary. In this moment, the angel

spoke to her. The angel explained what was happening and what was going to happen. The angel's here-is-how-it-is speech ended with Mary's declaration, "*Nothing is impossible with God!*" She took it all in, then declared her faith in God.



You and I might not ever have an angel of God speak with us. But you and I have the Holy Spirit and the promises we find in the Word of God. When we confess Jesus as Lord, then we receive the Holy Spirit. John 14:16 reads, "*The Holy Spirit will come and help you, because the Father will send the Spirit to take my place. The Spirit will teach you everything and will remind you of what I said while I was with you.*" As we grow in the faith, God promises that the Spirit will continue to help us. In Ephesians 1:17, we read, "*The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God.*" Much like Mary, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we will comprehend and be able to accept what God is speaking into our lives. Then we too, like Mary, will be able to say, "*I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said.*"





In today's scripture Mary is not the only expectant mother. We also have Elizabeth. In some ways they are very similar. Both are very un-expectedly pregnant. But Elizabeth has long given up on having a child; in human terms she is well beyond her child-bearing years. Mary is a virgin; in human terms it is impossible that she would be with child. Yet both are carrying a baby. Both have been visited by angels who have reassured them of their current situations. Both have no doubt of God's hand being active in their lives and both fully trust what is happening is of God. When Mary arrives for a visit, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at being in the presence of the Lord, still just a new creation in Mary's womb. The Holy Spirit comes upon her and she exclaims, "*God has*



blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. ⁴³ *Why should the mother of my Lord come to me?"* Both woman undoubtedly knew that Mary carried the Savior of the world, the Messiah.



The Israelites have been waiting for hundreds and hundreds of years for the Messiah. They have been waiting so long that many have almost given up, much like Elizabeth had given up her hopes of having a baby. Many wonder if God has forgotten the promise. The people longed for a Messiah to come. In their minds, the Messiah would be strong and powerful and would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to all of its former glory. But Jesus was not what they expected at all. Born to a simple family that was not even a real family yet, from a small, backwater town. He was not born in some grand palace, but in a humble stable. Jesus was not what the Jews expected the Messiah to be, but He was what they really needed Him

to be. He did not come to save them from their enemies, but to save them from themselves, from the chains of sin and death that held them truly captive.



John 1:14 proclaims, "*The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. From him all the kindness and all the*

truth of God have come down to us." The Israelites did not expect God to come in the flesh either. They expected something more like a messenger. Instead of Elijah or Isaiah or David, they got God in the flesh. This unexpected revelation of God took on flesh and "stepped into the terrain of human life to show us the way". Not only did Jesus show the way, He ushered in hope and mercy and love and forgiveness. This year during the Christmas season, believers and nonbelievers alike will latch onto this sense of hope. The feeling that good has come into the world is tangible at Christmas. At least for a season, the feeling that there is hope for our world is undeniable. Christmas reminds us of this hope. In this season of Advent, people believe that things can change for the better. As believers, we know that in the end Jesus will return and evil will be cast down forever. Heaven and earth will be made new and Jesus will reign forevermore. In Advent, even nonbelievers sense this possibility. This is what God expects in Advent. Each year at Christmas, God rejoices as we celebrate that "hope was born this night".



What do you expect this Christmas? What do you expect to change for you this Christmas? God expects that the birth of the Savior of the world will bring much change to the world this Advent season.



In the “Under Wraps” book, the first chapter ends with the story of a farmer. His family gets all dressed up and the wife and kids head off to church on Christmas Eve. He bristles at her invitation to join them. Reading from pages 22 and 23:

“Well, why would I want to get all dressed up in a scratchy suit and go and sit in that church with people I don’t even like and sing about a God I don’t even believe exists?” he grumbled.

After the wife and kids left for church, the farmer heard a noise in the dining room. He ran in and saw a little bird had flown into the dining room window. It had hit the window and bounced off and was lying there, stunned, in the flowerbed. Then the man noticed that a whole flock of small birds was in his yard, unusual for that time of year. Apparently they had been caught in an early snowfall and had to land right there in his pasture. They weren’t meant to be out there in the cold; and the farmer knew if they stayed out there, they might freeze to death.

Concerned, the farmer tried to lure the birds into his warm barn for shelter. He went out and opened the doors of the barn, but the birds didn’t pay any attention. He turned on the light and tried to make it warm and inviting, but the birds didn’t even notice. He tried making a trail of feed from inside the barn all the way out to where most of the birds were. But they simply pecked at the seed and wouldn’t get anywhere close to him. He tried to chase them into the barn. But nothing worked; they didn’t understand they needed to go into the barn for safety and shelter.

Discouraged, the farmer dropped to his knees in the snow. And then it hit him. 'The only way I can get through to them is to be a bird', he thought. 'To become like them, to put on a cloak of feathers, become one of them, and tell them about the hope, the life, the salvation that rests just on the other side of the barn doors. If only.

Suddenly he remembered where his wife and children were – down at the little church, celebrating a little baby who came into the world to offer the hope the whole world needed. Who came to offer HIM life and hope. The farmer puts on that scratchy suit, drives down the road, slides into the pew next to his very surprised wife, and begins to sing more loudly than anyone in church. 'Praise be to the newborn king, Christ our Lord'; 'Silent night, holy night. Son of God, love's pure light.' The farmer began to believe that something could change because of Christmas.



Who is the farmer for you, the one who does not know the love of Jesus Christ? Who is your heart breaking for? Who do you want God to get through to this Christmas? Who do you need to share the good news of Jesus Christ with? Who do you need to invite in?

Christmas is a season of hope and expectancy. It is a season when our hearts are ripe to walk closely with God. Advent is a time when God expects all people to be drawn closer. For many of you, someone came to mind in the story of the

farmer. Your heart is full of love and want for that person to know Christ. Pray for them. Pray for God to do the unexpected, to draw them into His love.

It is a "risky prayer" to pray. To have hope that God can and will reach into someone's heart this Christmas is a bold prayer. It is a prayer that is 'pregnant, expectant with hope.'" Christ, God in the flesh, stepped into our world to change the world forever. This is what God expects to happen because of Christmas.

Chapter One in the book closes with these thoughts:

'What are you expecting for Christmas? Do you have a longing that God will change something in our world? That God will change someone you love? That God will change you? God loves an expectant heart, and he is eager to surprise us with the gifts of his goodness and love. May we wait for him with eager hearts.'

May we wait with eager hearts. May we expect God to surprise us this Advent season. May we expect God to change us this Advent. Let us pray.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

1. How has your prayer time or conversations with God changed over the years? How can you leave room for God to surprise you?
2. When have you had your 'Mary moment' – when the Spirit spoke or nudged you? How did you respond? How could have you responded?
3. In what ways do you limit God? How can you be more open to God's leading in your life?
4. God is expectant. Advent is a time for us to be expectant. Pray an open-ended pray, asking God to show you where you can be a servant.