

Wednesday, December 2, 2020 – Advent Midweek I

“Advent Expectation”

Luke 1: 13-15a, 18, 24;25, 57

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

A woman sits alone in her house. It is quiet – too quiet. She is married, and her husband, a priest is serving in the temple. She is used to it, being alone. Where other women would have been with their children or grandchildren, Elizabeth is alone – not necessarily lonely, just resigned to the fact that she will not have children. She had accepted that fact but she couldn't help what would happen as she grew older – children were the Social Security of the ancient world – without kids or grandkids, there was no safety net, not to mention that she would not experience the joy of having a family.

You can see them can't you, Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah as they struggled with infertility in their younger years? I wonder, how often had she prayed to the Lord like Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother, did centuries before? Perhaps she cried out with the anguish of Rachel, Jacob's wife, "Give me children, or I shall die!" I think though that she was more like Sarah, Abraham's wife, adopting a matter-of-fact attitude that being a mother would just never happen for her.

And at the end of this ordinary day, alone at home, in comes Zechariah, excited and frustrated – and unable to speak. Can you imagine him, gesturing, trying to explain what happened? I suppose he could have written it out, but given the meager percentage of literate people in the ancient world, especially for women since their parents usually didn't send them to school, even if Zechariah could read and write, the odds are Elizabeth could not. Perhaps, at some point, another person could read Zechariah's scribbling to her – some crazy story about an angel making some amazing promise in the temple, but by that time Elizabeth probably could already guess the miracle that the angel told Zechariah about, because she could feel it in herself – the promise is that she would become pregnant.

A few months later, a younger relative named Mary with a yet younger child in her own womb came to visit. Both women were filled with the Holy Spirit – and Elizabeth prophesied that Mary was the mother of our Lord, the Messiah. Her own son who would be called John confirmed this, leaping for joy

in his mother's womb. Through it all, Elizabeth's meager expectations of God were changed and she learned that human expectations pale in comparison to God's great gifts for us.

What are your expectations? Your expectations for Christmas? Advertisers pump a ton of money into influencing your expectations for gifts, and if we buy into that hype it's easy to become disappointed if we don't get what we want. Some of us are feeling bad this year, because their budgets won't meet their own expectations for the kind of Christmas they'd like to have, and because travel restrictions mean a year, perhaps the first year, of not seeing family. Others find disappointment because they have expectations for a relationship – this is finally the year Mom will approve, or Dad will be kind, or Uncle Jerry won't say something crude and rude at the table or Aunt Jane won't make a humiliating comment, or that the kids won't have a meltdown. And then, just as we thought, our expectations go unmet yet again.

What are your expectations for yourself? Will you do better this Christmas? "I'll stay in my budget, I'll stick to my diet, I'll control my temper. How will those expectations come out?" And that makes me think about our expectations of God. What are our expectations of God? Are our expectations proper? Are we conforming our expectations to God's will, or are we looking for something different, dreamed up in our own heads?

As I think about all these expectations, it seems to me that we often become like Elizabeth – we may settle for what's expected. Instead of getting my hopes up and being disappointed, I'll set my sights low. I'll expect less from others, less of myself and less of God – at least then I won't be surprised. After all, I've heard it said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, and expecting different results.

Does God want more for us than that? Are we settling for mediocrity, for disappointment and failure in our relationships with God and with each other – when we don't have to – when God has so much more in store for us?

What should we expect from God? Depends, first, on what we think of ourselves. Let's be honest about who we are – sinners. As sinners, what we should expect is for God to judge and condemn us for our sins. But I think more often, we act as if we've been wronged and are deserving of something. We suppose that others are worse sinners than we are, to save face. We focus our attention on one-upping

each other – I may be bad, but he’s worse. I think of when I was a kid and in the neighborhood we’d pick baseball teams with a bat – one would grab the fat end of the bat and you’d go up, hand over hand until there was no more bat to grip – we’re so worried about being slightly better than someone else that we forget who we truly are according to God’s standards – we’re sinners. We don’t deserve any blessings or favor. There’s no prize for being the best among sinners. In fact, there’s no such thing as best among sinners.

And yet, we do find the greatest blessings and favor from our heavenly Father. Not because of who we are or how much we’ve impressed him, not because we slid in over the top and grabbed the knob of the bat over and above someone else – we have His favor because of who He is and because He sent Jesus for us.

Elizabeth had resigned herself to what she thought was her fate – that she would not have a child. But the God of grace and blessings caused her to conceive, against all odds – despite her age, the age of her husband, she became pregnant and bore John the Baptizer – the same John of whom prophets hundreds of years before said would “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Her own body testified to her that God could work miracles. Elizabeth was living proof that God exceeds our human expectations. But God didn’t stop there because when Mary came to her, the Holy Spirit helped Elizabeth to recognize and to greet the Word made flesh, the Messiah, even while he was still in His mother’s womb.

We, too, should expect to receive nothing, yet God’s gracious gifts exceed our human expectations. Yet we receive where we ought to expect nothing. Instead of His wrath, we find His grace. Instead of His rejection, we find His love and His acceptance. Instead of His punishment, we receive His Son Jesus, the Word made flesh, our Savior. He took our sin and suffering and death, face them all in our place and gave us his life and holiness. And still, He continues to give to us freely and graciously.

What are you expecting this Christmas? It’d make my day to tell you that all your hopes and dreams, and my own, would be met. We will find disappointments in this life in the actions of others and even ourselves. But when it comes to our Lord, we find a God who is faithful. He gives the greatest gifts, gifts that exceed our human expectations, meeting hopes and dreams far greater than the ones we think we need done our way. God has more in store for us than we could ever expect, through Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.