

SLD12.24.06 Fourth Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:26-38
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“What Are We Expecting?”

So I have a niece who's expecting. We haven't had a baby in our family in a long time so we're all pretty excited. My sister asked me if I'd give her a baby shower on the 27th. That's two days after Christmas. Three days after three services. The day before my birthday. The week before I start packing my house to move. A month before my mongo renovation.

But of course I said, “okay.”

What would you expect? She's my eldest sister. This is her youngest daughter. My mom's not around to pinch hit for me. And even if my house *will* be rubble shortly, it's standing at the moment and pretty much all we've got in Atlanta these days. Anyway, like I said, in my family, it's been a long time since we've been expecting a baby.

'Course, staging a baby shower for my extended family, most of whom (the rich side) have never been to my home, at this particular time of year is about the last thing I was expecting. I mean, even for your average pastor, the demands of the season are pretty challenging. For this particularly introverted single mom/solo pastor, who's grieving her parents, whose kid's in pain from spacers, whose house is fixin' to be demolished, and many of whose parishioners and staff are grieving or stressed, the most I was really expecting of the season was just to make it through. But add a baby shower? Well, Lord, have mercy.

It was in this jolly mode of pessimism and low-grade panic that I turned to today's text and read: **Luke 1: 26-38.**

And I thought / had problems. Talk about somebody who isn't expecting a baby shower! Poor Mary. Young, unmarried, first century, Jewish girl in the middle of organizing her wedding invitations. Like she needs to be thinking about babies. But you know God. Don't let anybody tell you convenience is part of the divine m.o.

"Greetings, favored one!" announces the intrusive Gabriel. *"The Lord is with you!"* Which, as we all know, is not necessarily good news. Mary's response is "perplexed," very perplexed, says Luke, using the Greek word "diataraxthei" _____, which literally means "to stir up otherwise still waters." And indeed, given her circumstances - young, female, pregnant out of marriage in first century Palestine, Mary's otherwise still waters must have been stirred up to a maelstrom, sure enough. For at best Mary can expect to be shunned and isolated by her society; at worst, she and her child will be stoned for adultery.

Yet despite her fear and confusion, and against all reason, Mary opens herself to God's will, consents for the Holy Spirit to come upon her, and allows the overshadowing of the Most High. Trusting Gabriel that what issues from this union will, indeed, be holy, says Mary, "Let it be with me according to your Word."

And in that moment of trust and surrender, the Holy Spirit does overshadow Mary with the power and promise of God, and Mary becomes

expectant. And whom Mary expects to deliver is Jesus. And what Mary expects to deliver is...God...to the world.

Tonight is Christmas Eve and Mary is expecting to deliver God. And what, I find myself wondering, are you and I expecting?

To get all the presents wrapped? To start preparing Christmas dinner? To make it back for one of the evening services? To pop a Zoloft to make it through tomorrow? To put on a happy face for the kids? To relish getting what you asked for? To steel yourself for disappointment?

Tonight is Christmas Eve and Mary, Mother of God, is expecting to deliver Jesus. What are you and I expecting? Or rather, what, in this irrational season of God-seeding, *should* we be expecting? Is this divine overshadowing thing limited to 1st century Palestinian ingénues or might God yet be seeding something in us? What is **God** expecting us to expect? Is our three-person'd God not forever in the business of creating, redeeming and sustaining Life? Of course the Most High continues to overshadow the willing. To deliver God to the world, God chooses as a vessel anyone open to God's possibilities. How we respond, however, is another matter.

When God asks Mary to bear God to the world, Mary has the courage, humility and grace to say "yes." One writer remarks that ¹ "Mary could not have said "no" to God because it would have been contrary to her nature. But when God asks **us** to bear God in the world, what do we say? Well, this same writer observes that at our deepest core, (saying "no") is contrary as well. Truly, we

¹ "The Gift of Change," from From Asking God to Change the World to Praying That He Change Us, p. 102-103.

long to say “yes!” to God but we’re so out of touch with who we are, so harried or stressed or hurt or afraid that too often we find ourselves responding “maybe later, God, when I have more time, or more money, or more faith.” God, I feel impatient with myself on this score.

Or, maybe one day we say, “Yes, God, in this moment you can express your love through me.” But comes another day, another situation, and we just can’t seem to make the stretch. So we say “no”... to more forgiveness, more generosity, more love.

The good news is that the angel Gabriel persists. Every time we say “no,” he simply waits to ask us again, bringing the situation around again to give us another chance. Do you notice that? I do, and find it sort of annoying and encouraging at the same time.

Tonight is Christmas Eve and Mother Mary is expecting to deliver the Son of God. What are we expecting?

Friday afternoon I swung by Target to pick up a few more things for Christopher’s stocking (if you can call waiting 10 minutes to turn left and another 15 for a parking space “swinging by.”) Anyway, you know the motto at Target: “Expect More, Pay Less.” “Expect More, Pay Less” – kind of sums up your average adolescent’s view of Christmas, doesn’t it? And maybe, the American Dream. But worse, I fear, is the seasonal motto of those of us who wish not only to pay less, but to **expect** less of Christmas. For if we’re expecting only the annual frenzy of shopping, cooking, partying, gift-giving, and special music and services, we’re not expecting enough.

We disciples of Jesus Christ, though we may pay dearly with our hearts, we need to expect *more* from this season of God's inbreaking into the life of humanity. A great *deal* more. Because *our* expectations are rooted, not in the demands or frenzy of the season, but in God's ancient covenant to redeem all creation; not in whatever presents we give or receive, but in Jesus' promise to come again; not even in meeting the expectations of all who need us, but in the limitless redeeming power of the Holy Spirit. Do you understand what I am saying? The most precious and tender manifestation of our forever creating, redeeming and sustaining God is about to be born again tonight!

And irony of ironies, to deliver God to the world, God chooses as a vessel one terrified, teenage, 1st century, Jewish girl. But when overshadowed by the goodness and the power and the love and the promise of God, Mary is seeded with a state of expectancy that frees her from the compromise and fear of her circumstance, which liberation allows the Word to become flesh in her.

And this is not Mary's pattern, this is *God's* pattern.

To deliver God to the world, God chooses as a vessel any one who is open to the possibility, to seeds that state of expectancy that frees from the fear and compromise of the moment, which allows the Word to become flesh yet again in him, in her, in me, in you. Do you understand?

Mary is simply the paradigm for any of us who wish to be God-bearers,² who wish to manifest Christ in our individual lives and in our community. The challenge is to be fearless in discerning the seed of God's presence in our own being. To be expectant in looking for something within that may be quiet but

² "Events in Jesus' Ministry," Father Thomas Keating, www.centeringprayer.com/wklyart.htm, p.2.

true, silent but essential; something in the core of you that only you could recognize. And only if you were looking...expectantly. Because, despite the consequences, which can be extreme, the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit can be as subtle as a glance, as fragile as an intention, as disorienting as a dream.

So again I ask you. Tonight is Christmas Eve and Mary is expecting to bear the Prince of Peace. What are you expecting? What, if you let God have God's way with you, might God bring you to bear? What, if you surrender to the invitation of the Most High, would change? What, shift? What divine spark might fan into flame? What that is holy might issue from the union? What is God trying to deliver through you?

Or through this church – what is God trying to deliver through us?

The other day I held a meeting at Presbytery about a crazy dream that's been floating around this church for a while. Present were Presbytery execs Ed Albright and Forrest Palmer, and Rob McClellan and Bobbi Epting of Emory Campus Ministry, and Wendy Riggs, God bless her, because that Wendy can flat get her head around a dream.

It was just a brainstorming session, a catch-up, if you will, to a meeting that happened a year or so ago before I came about possible new uses for our education building. Only this time the dream inched a little closer, the vision got a little clearer; the ideas, more concrete. We're sitting on some hot property here at Emory church and God might be expecting us to make better use of it, or rather, to make better use of *us* through our property. No doubt but that God has

seeded among us a hopeful and expectant attitude, and our Session, I am proud to say, is not afraid to explore what God may be trying to deliver through us.

You know, Mary's willingness to be overshadowed by the mystery of God, her courage to deliver what God conceived in her, her choice to say "yes" regardless of the consequences, these are Mary's greatest gifts to those of us who wish to follow her Son. My prayer is that those of us who are willing in this church, in this Session, will muster the courage and faith of one unmarried teenage Hebrew girl who long ago said "yes" to the usually unexpected, often uninvited, and invariably disruptive fluttering of God's new life within and among us.

Tonight is Christmas Eve and the Mother of God is expecting. Expecting the birth of the Christ child...and expecting *us* to bear him to the world. And you and I...what are *we* expecting?

To the glory of God. Amen.