

“Expecting a Mystery: Hope and Promise”

Luke 1:5-13,14-23 – Tesa Hauser

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be open to receiving a word of hope this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Advent is here; we are now in a season of preparation for the coming of Christ and new creation. I want to begin by talking about our theme for Advent and our sermon series, “Expecting a Mystery.” As Pastor Rebecca shared in the December newsletter, over the next few Sundays, we are going to look at four characters within the birth narrative, Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph, and explore how God works through their lives in unexpected ways. “How does one expect a mystery?” you may be thinking. Great question.

Expecting the unexpected is a part of life; we are constantly expecting the mysterious in our lives since we can't know the future. Even when we know something is going to happen or have it on our calendars, we won't know how that situation or event will turn out until it happens.

For example, Mary and Elizabeth will literally be expecting, as in they are pregnant and will give birth to a child. However, as I imagine most parents would say after having children, they had no idea what parenting would look like. Then you include the prophecies on John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, and I'm assuming these parents were in for a greater mystery. How does one raise the one who, “will

turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord,” as Luke 1:16-17 states about John? Parenting is tough, but with the weight of that also on your shoulders – yikes.

So, we begin with Zechariah and the mystery he will be expecting. Let’s set the scene. Zechariah and Elizabeth were the best neighbors anyone could want. As tenants in their apartment, they were rarely loud, and if so, apologized for the inconvenience with a homemade treat they knew you liked. They checked your mail when you were out of town, and would dog-sit, if necessary, with glee. They rarely asked for payment for their services but accepted if insisted and were happy to be your neighbor.

As homeowners, they made sure the contents of their trees stayed within their property; Zechariah would occasionally offer to mow the lawn, and their parties were so much fun even the most introverted of people tried to stop by when invited. Okay, so we don’t know what kind of neighbors Zechariah and Elizabeth were, but what we do know Luke tells us is that they were righteous and blameless, humble servants of God. They aren’t perfect, but they fully participated in the provisions of the covenant, and they followed the law.

When they first married, we can assume it was celebrated by everyone, as a close-to-perfect match that a priest would marry a daughter of Aaron. That's when expectations set in quickly; it was then time to have children! We enter the story within Luke and meet this wonderful couple who is struggling; though they are both righteous and blameless, they can't have children. Not only that, but they are also getting older and so Elizabeth's childbearing years are getting shorter. We immediately have sympathy for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The irony is that they were close to perfect in the sight of God, and so the fact that they had no children must have been confusing to them and those around them. They weren't blessed with children and yet had done nothing wrong to deserve such a fate. It was society's expectation they would have children, to have heirs that would carry the family line and tradition, and eventually care for Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. I bet it wasn't only hard on Zechariah, but hard to imagine and know how his wife was being talked about. In ancient times, women were typically blamed and seen as barren if a couple had no children.

It appears the lack of progeny did not hinder his ability to lead or be seen as righteous or blameless before God or even his community. Sure, they may have talked about him and his wife behind his back – but could not deny that they were a part of the priestly lineage. Zechariah enters the temple, anxious and worried; this role was important. It only came around once in a lifetime, and he was chosen for

it. I'm sure his focus is solely on the task at hand when the angel comes incredibly unexpectedly. I know we don't talk about angels often, but in this story and all subsequent stories, angels arrive at the most inconvenient times, right? They arrive, and the person is terrified of what they see that the angels have to say, "Do not be afraid." Which feels unhelpful? Kind of like telling someone to "calm down," in a stressful situation.

Still, Zechariah obviously held out hope, praying for a child, as the angel calls out that his prayer has been heard in verse 15. Knowing what God had done for Abraham and Sarah, and for others, he held onto hope, even if it seemed impossible. His response is the most relatable response, even as someone who has been faithful to God, "Even the faithful grow dull in their expectations," one commentary I read noted. In an obviously disorienting moment, Zechariah questions the angel Gabriel, how will Elizabeth have a child at her old age. He is asking the same questions as his ancestors and forgets what God has done. Why would God do for me, like my great ancestors? He is told by Gabriel that they were chosen to parent the prophet who will make a way for the Messiah, and he just can't believe it.

In that moment all expectations are swept away. At this point they expected to never have a child. As a result, he will be unable to speak for the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy. For nine months he will marinate in God's goodness for his

and Elizabeth's lives. I'm assuming this is not the way Zechariah thought he would enter fatherhood. Unable to verbally share his joys and concerns with his pregnant wife; unable to comfort her when it got hard or when she was tired. He didn't expect to be told about his son from an angel, nor I assumed he believed his son would be a prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

God's keeps God's promise though and John is born; the hope of a child is fulfilled by God. We see that he will be named John, which means, "Yahweh has shown favor" or "Yahweh is gracious" which is how it must of have felt after the weight of expectation of family, neighbors, and society had been lifted with this birth. After John is born, Zechariah can speak again, and is able to finally remove those expectations and we hear him prophesy. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah echoes the angel Gabriel's words, praising God and proclaiming the Savior and his son, who will prepare the way.

Let's set the scene again. Here we are thousands of years later from the birth of John, a season that can be difficult as well. Advent is the beginning of the liturgical calendar, which is ironic that it is in the final months of the calendar year. For many it is a time of reflection of the hopes and expectations we had for the year. We think about the expectations we put on ourselves or have been put on us by others. There are expectations for us to be constantly happy and cheerful, which is unrealistic. Still, my wish is that we are open to the glimmers of hope that shine,

even in the darkest days. Let us ask God to show signs of hope, signs of grace and mercy, and of relief and joy. And let us be open to when those moments arrive. It might hard to accept, when our expectations are not met or go above what we could have even imagined. Don't let your expectations or other peoples, or societies expectations cause you to miss the moments of hope.

There is hope found in those neighbors, who are loving and kind, with no expectations of having the favor returned. Hope can be found in the unspoken but consistent prayers in our midst; it is found in family, blood and chosen, and friends around a meal or on a hike. In this season, even in the hard, we remember what has been promised and that in that there is hope. There is hope that Christ will come once again and make all things new. We hope for peace in the world, we hope for the end to violence, for healing, to be reunited with loved ones passed, we hope for all to finally be cared for and loved as beloved children and creatures of God.

Alleluia and Amen.