



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Sermon: "Expecting the Unexpected"
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James 5:7-10
Luke 1:26-38

I will never forget that particular Christmas morning. My eleven-year-old brother and a seven-year-old me flew down the stairs (in our matching reindeer onesie pajamas) and dove straight towards the foot of our family's Christmas tree.

We grabbed the two biggest gifts wrapped in bright green and red paper marked "Love, Mom and Dad." I wondered: *Could this be the newest Nintendo game? Or the jeep for Barbie to get around the house?* We ripped our gifts open. Mine was a great big tree of broccoli. My brother's, a large tin of Quaker oatmeal.

"Eww!", we both screamed. We looked up at our parents in disbelief, "Where are the real gifts?"

"These are the real gifts." They said sporting big smiles from ear to ear. "How do you like them?"

Now, I should have prefaced this story by saying there is nothing that I despised more as a child than broccoli, and there is nothing that turned my brother's stomach upside down like Quaker oatmeal.

But after a few long, hard minutes had passed and my giggling parents had photographed us with our new gifts, it was all becoming a bit too real. Maybe these really were our Christmas gifts. So, in an attempt to make peace with that, I finally turned to my brother, and said with a sigh, "Well, you wanna switch?"

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Time and time again, life reveals itself to be immensely unpredictable. We don't always get the gift we expect, or the outcome we want, or the chapter we feel ready for. We have to make split decisions, change course, patiently wait...

And never is this truer for us than around the holiday season:
As much as we try, we can't determine if our family gathering will go smoothly,
if they'll be no delay in travel plans,
if the Christmas ham won't burn this year,
if our cousin will finally say "I'm sorry,"

if our uncle will hold his tongue,
if the absence of Mom will feel less painful,
if the invitation will even come in the mail at all.

We know that as much as we like to plan for the future,
as much as we like to be in control of the present,
when it comes to our complex, ever-changing lives and our fraught human society,
we are better off staying on toes - ready to "expect the unexpected."

This was true for Mary. As a teenager betrothed to Joseph, her road ahead seemed clearly lit. Mary and her family must have been eagerly anticipating the security that would come with her marriage to a "good match." And Mary and Joseph may have been imagining together where their lives would take them:

Maybe Joseph hoped to one day open up a little backyard carpentry business (sort of a Home Depot meets ancient Israel type deal). Perhaps Mary looked forward to passing on the sweetest traditions from her Jewish faith - to the family they would build together. *Who knows?* Everything seemed to be falling perfectly into place, until...

When the Angel Gabriel visits Mary and delivers the news that she will be expecting the "Son of the Most High," suddenly Mary's road ahead turns dark. This is an outrageous request and it jeopardizes everything.

If she is to carry this holiest of gifts into the world, she is in-turn endangering every plan put in place for her life, for her survival: her upcoming marriage, her family's reputation, her personal safety. To be a woman in ancient Israel was hard enough. To potentially be a divorced, single mother accused of adultery was synonymous with a life of destitution, marginalization, even prostitution or death.

*Why would God put a teenager in such a precarious, unanticipated position?
Why bless someone so unprepared, with this "gift" that could unravel her entire life?*

The image of the angel visiting Mary has captured our collective imagination for centuries. We've seen numerous artistic depictions of our girl crouched down in the corner wearing a perfectly ironed blue scarf, every hair neatly in place, her eyes gently peering up towards heaven. And the angel, with a golden halo and toga towering above her, bright and big as the room, singing out: "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you - *and by the way you are going to have a baby!*"

Depictions like this can be awe-inspiring for us or they can be unsettling. The angel can seem overpowering, and Mary submissive, afraid, obedient and small, bowing and saying, "Here I am." This sort of obedience to an all-powerful God might feel positive, and yet we know that far too often passages like this have been misused by people to justify their own power over others.

In Bible Study last week, I was reminded that there are endless ways to imagine what this moment could have looked like:

Maybe the angel and Mary are having coffee together at a breakfast table, chatting about her future. Or perhaps Gabriel comes as a small child tugging at Mary's arm, eager to share this good news with her. Or maybe the angel speaks through the wind blowing softly through her unkempt hair, whispering in her ear.

We know that God's angels come in many forms and unexpected ways. And so we should feel free to read and imagine this encounter anew every time.

When we do this, we give Mary more nuance, more human color and fire and shape and dimension and agency. And we see an angel who is inviting her into conversation, calling her into relationship, offering her this most unexpected, holy gift - to bring God's cherished Son into the world.

Other images of Mary - like the one of her at table with the angel sharing a coffee - remind us that there is something grand, yet deeply personal going on here: Gabriel is not only calling upon Mary to trust in God, but reminding her that God is placing God's trust in Mary also. God is saying "with me nothing will be impossible" and Mary is responding in faith with, "Here I am."

This is a moment of profound mutual trust. Mary is putting her life in God's hands, and God is putting God's life in Mary's hands.

For Mary, this is an unexpected, life-shifting, faith-shaking gift - but for God there is nothing unexpected or strange about it. She is the one whom God has been waiting for.

"God chooses Mary exactly because she has nothing,"ⁱ Dr. Robert Tannehill writes. She is not favored in the human realm, and she even identifies herself as lowly and poor.

Friends, God is seeking to come as Jesus Christ - poor and lowly too - to turn the world upside down, and offer human connection and divine salvation to those who have been silenced, marginalized and persecuted for so long. In essence, God's favor of Mary is the embodiment of God's reign of justice and favor for all people - especially those most in pain, especially those who feel most undeserving.

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The Bible is filled with stories like this:

God reaching out to the unprepared, the lowly, the lost, the enemy, the outcast and offering something holy unexpected.

There's Moses with a stutter - called to help free the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.

Sarah - old and grey - told that she'll be fruitful and multiply,

There's Esther - empowered to speak up and save the Jewish people

Saul, with a vengeful heart - transformed to Paul to share the message of Christ the Savior.

The Bible is filled with these stories. *Why is this?* Maybe it's because this is the way God acts, then and now, in big and small ways. God is constantly putting God's trust in those

who wouldn't even make the first cut on a Varsity team. And God is calling them – as God calling us - to take part in the most sacred tasks.

Friends, God seeks us out not despite our brokenness, imperfections, and limitations, but because of them. God invites us - as we are - into mutual trust, into a world of endless, wondrous possibilities.

What will it take for us to have the courage, the obedience, the faith, the *hutzpah*, to declare Mary's words: "Here I Am?"

To say "Here I am," is to be willing to set aside our own plans and follow Christ no matter where the road leads. To say "Here I am," is to trust in a God who trusts in us to help bring about the peaceable kingdom on earth. To say "Here I am," is to believe in our hearts Gabriel's words: "nothing is impossible with God."

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A few years ago, I traveled down to El Salvador with a group of seminarians to study the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero and other religious leaders and organizers who advocate for the rights of the poor.

In the 1970s and 80s, hundreds of thousands of El Salvadorians immigrated to United States in order to escape war and persecution. During that time, fourteen families held all of the power and wealth in the country, and when people spoke out or fought back against injustice, they were quickly made to disappear forever.

Even cherished Oscar Romero was shot down while leading mass and an entire town of people were slaughtered in an attempt to eliminate any possible rebels. Most disturbing perhaps, is that at the time the United States was sending millions of dollars a day to finance weapons for those in power and writing off any reports of violence as nothing more than propaganda.

One afternoon, we sat down with a retired general named Francisco Mena and a woman named Evelin Romero to hear their story.

Evelin said she was just seventeen when the conflict in El Salvador was at an all-time high. Resources were cut off from her rural village of El Rosario and the people were starving to death. She remembers slicing *pupusas* (their local bread) into tiny pieces and distributing it out, so that folks could have at least one small bite to eat each day.

During this time, General Francisco received orders to enter into Evelin's village and murder all four thousand men, women and children. Although he had deep reservations about such a gruesome mission, he was told by his superiors that they might have hidden weapons or rebel fighters – and orders were orders.

So, he and his men rounded up all of the civilians into the square. Many folks were crying, praying, screaming out. Evelin frightened to her core, held her rosary tightly in her hand.

The General pulled her aside and shouted, "Where are your weapons? Where are you all hiding them?" Evelin took a breath, and responded,

"We don't have any weapons. Can't you see? We need food."

"Where are the rebels?", he shouted even more severely. "Where are you housing them?"

"We don't have any rebels" she said sternly, "Can't you see? We are so hungry. We need bread not bullets."

Francisco said that her bold words hit him like the Holy Spirit washing over. "My conscience was telling me to trust this woman – to trust her words – to trust her pain – to trust her strength - and put everything on the line to do what I knew in my soul was right."

So, Francisco got on the intercom and asked the planes to drop down food to the village, he called upon his soldiers to move on, for the civilians to return home, and then he abandoned his post to join the country's resistance movement.

There may not have been an angel there that day, at least not one that they could see, but God was calling out loud and clear. There was expectation, fear, courage, trust, incarnation, relationship, obedience, resistance, surprise, salvation, possibility, holy transformation. And because of this, they changed the course of history.

The story of Mary is also a story of us.

God calls to us all the time:

in simple and in dramatic ways,

sometimes in a loud voice, sometimes in a whisper,

towering above us and sitting right across the kitchen table.

God calls us again and again into mutual trust, into relationship, into an unexpected future.

And God doesn't promise that it will be without pain or struggle or sorrow.

God doesn't promise that there won't be high mountains for us to climb.

God doesn't promise that we won't have moments of doubt and fear and anger.

But God does promise that a life of faith is one where no matter what happens, hope still abounds, salvation is ever-possible, and we will never walk the path alone.

Now, this is a gift that is worth receiving.

This is a gift that can change the world.

ⁱ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville, Abingdon Press), 48.