

“What Are You Expecting?”

By Carol Patterson

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:26-31, 36-38 NIV

On this first Sunday in the season of Advent—the time when the church begins to celebrate Christ coming into the world—today’s message is about hope and anticipation. I’d like to share a memory with you.

[SHOW HEINZ KETCHUP RETRO COMMERCIAL]

Do remember that? I’m a Heinz ketchup lover! I like fries with my ketchup. I love Heinz so much that I was in the habit of sticking my knife in the bottle to spread the ketchup on my fries. It was my custom to hurry it along. How many are aware that we can’t hurry God? We sing a song about the God-you-can’t-hurry that goes a little something like this ...

You can’t hurry God,
you Just have to wait.
Trust and give {God} time,
no matter how long it takes.

{We serve} a God you can’t hurry,
you don’t have to worry;
{God} may not come when you want {God},
but {God is ALWAYS} right on time, right on time.

That was the CLP remix of a familiar church song.

Have you ever waited for God on anything that you just knew would be good with tiptoe anticipation? Trying to peak over the horizon of time?

If you have ... then you can identify with the feeling of hopeful expectancy

that the faithful remnant of devout Jews must have had as they waited for the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah to be fulfilled. With that type of anticipation, would you please consider the sermon subject, *What Are You Expecting?*

It was about 700 years before the birth of Jesus when the prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would:

- Be a descendant of King David;
- Minister in Galilee; and
- Although He would be sinless, He would bear our sins and sorrows.

For seven centuries faithful worshippers went to the temple expecting a sign that Isaiah's prophecies would be fulfilled in their lifetime. One day when the priest Zechariah was preparing the altar, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him:

- Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.
- He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.
- He will go before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Although Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, wanted to have a child ...

Zechariah found Gabriel's announcement hard to believe.

After all, he and Elizabeth had been trying to conceive for a very long time without success. So, Zechariah asked, "*How can I be sure of this? I'm an old man and my wife is well along in years.*" The angel said to him, "*I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.*" That's the background leading up to our scripture for today.

Mary, a young woman who had known no man, was expecting. Elizabeth and Zechariah, a very mature couple, were expecting. Without God, both of these things would have been impossible. But, as Gabriel told Mary, "*No word from God will ever fail.*"

I want you to think for a moment. What seed of hope has God deposited in you about how you might let your Christ-light shine? Before you come to the conclusion that you can't think of anything, remember that God plants seeds of hope in all of us. They're based on our unique personalities, characters, gifts, and talents. It may have been a long time ago. You may have stopped thinking or dreaming about it.

Certainly, my sisters and my brothers, God has a God-sized vision for how this church can shine as a bright light in this neighborhood—as bright as the star that led the Magi and the shepherds to the manger where Christ was born.

I'm here to tell everyone who can hear me this morning—and to remind myself—that we're alive because God has something for us to do. So, I ask the question to all of us again: *What are you expecting? What are you hoping for?*

To hope is to look ahead with confidence and courage. *How are you expecting it?*

Gabriel brought long-awaited news to Zechariah and unexpected news to Mary. He told them both not to be afraid.

Oftentimes the plans God has for us are larger and greater than we can imagine. They seem daunting at first. We wonder IF we can accomplish God's plans. We have no idea HOW we will accomplish God's plans. Thank God today's text is tailored to teach us that with God *nothing*/No Thing is impossible!

Zechariah and Elizabeth show us that there is no such thing as too hard for God. When it seems like something God promised us is taking longer than we would like, we have to remember that a delay is NOT a denial. Good things *really* do come to those who wait.

Sometimes ... hurt, disappointment, or shame cause us to give up on our dreams. Maybe we've tried and failed before. Or, maybe someone said we couldn't do it. So, we simply stopped

looking ahead with confidence and courage.

My prayer is that—if this is you—you're being encouraged today to expect God to fulfill the promise God made you. You're gaining the courage to partner with God on implementing the plan God gave you. You're noticing that it matters *how* you respond when the Spirit speaks to you.

Mary responded with faith and trust. She sang a song of praise that has echoed through two millennia.

Many churches are singing Mary's Magnificat today. It's a Catholic tradition on the first Sunday of Advent because the Magnificat magnifies the Lord as the fulfillment of God's promise.

Mary said YES to God's life-altering plan—even though it had the potential to cost her her future with Joseph. The King James Version tells us she was espoused to him. Today, we would say engaged. Popping up pregnant could have presented a problem. In Matthew's gospel, Joseph ponders putting her away privately. An angel of the Lord comes to him in a dream and convinces him to continue with the marriage plans.

It's quite possible that when Mary pondered Gabriel's words in her heart, she wondered if Joseph might leave her.

Times were different back then. Women needed men. It was a man's world. Men provided for women. Mary risked losing the proverbial bird she had in her hand to obey God's will for her life. She walked by faith. She trusted God to make everything alright.

I wonder how often we miss out on the *great* things God has around the corner for us by setting our sights on the *good* in front of us.

Matthew 6:33 promises us that if we seek God's kingdom first, everything else we need will be added to our lives. Mary's story shows us this truth.

Zechariah—on the other hand—responded to Gabriel with fear and doubt. He was silenced for several months.

The good news for Zechariah is that he regained his speech after naming his son John as God instructed.

When I ask you *how* you are expecting whatever it is that you are expecting from God, my question is: *Are you fearful and doubtful like Zechariah? OR are you trusting and believing like Mary?*

By faith, she praised God *before* the promise was fulfilled. By sight, he praised God *after* his son was born.

Just in case you're thinking, I'm not carrying the Christ child or any other child for that matter ... I want to remind you that you are pregnant with possibility—whether you are a woman or a man. So, I encourage you to nurture the seed of hope that God has deposited within you.

Journal,

dream,

plan,

praise God in anticipation!

Look ahead with confidence and courage—not only to your individual Christ-light shining brightly, but also to this church being the shining example of a city set on a hill that draws others to Christ like the light from a lighthouse guiding boats to shore. I am confident that each of us has the power to do great things that bring glory to God because:

- God sent Jesus into the world so that the world through Him might be saved; and
- Jesus sends the church to be his witnesses in the world and endows everyone who receives him as Lord and Savior with the empowering Holy Spirit.

Do you have any idea how much power God sends you into the world with? I tell you that we have *dunamis* power! We get the word dynamite from the Greek word *dunamis*. God has given each of us the power to exceed not only our own expectations; but, also to rearrange things in such a way that we end up exceeding the expectations others have of us. That's what happened with Elizabeth! No one expected her to be a mother at her life stage.

Ephesians 3:20—the benediction I most often say—reminds us that God's power is at work within us. The verse says that God is able to do exceedingly and abundantly above all that we can ask, think or even imagine

ACCORDING TO THE POWER THAT IS AT WORK WITHIN US. That power is our faith. That power is fueled by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit—the same Spirit God used to raise Jesus from the dead!!!

It is my tradition to light the Prophet's candle on the Advent wreath today ... the candle of hope ... the candle that symbolizes a faith that endured for more than 700 years until the Christ-child was born ... I invite you to remember that just as God made that promise come true, God will fulfill what God promised you.

Be reminded this day of *what* you are expecting. Be mindful of *how* you are expecting it—whatever it is. Look ahead with confidence and courage because *with God, nothing is impossible.*

Gabriel said these words to Mary announcing our Savior's birth.

Jesus says the same thing to his disciples when he's talking about who can be saved, "With God, all things are possible." Whenever fear or doubt arise as you strive to fulfill the hopes and dreams God has deposited in you, remind yourself that "With God, all things are possible."

Please help me close this message about:

- incarnational (Christ inspired)
- missional (disciple making)
- ministry (the work of the church)

AaaaaND personal potential by saying these next three phrases in the presence of witnesses. Repeat after me.

- I am the Lord's servant.
- I'm expecting something from God.
- Let it happen as God has said!

Let's seal these anticipatory affirmations of faith and hope by praying together.

Dear Lord,

Show us how our own Christ lights may shine as bright as the star that guided the Magi and the shepherds to the manger where Jesus was born

Surprise us like Gabriel did Zechariah

We praise you in advance like Mary did—believing that the coming of Jesus into her life and our world is Your resounding “YES” to those who wait faithfully on You with great expectations. Amen!