

But what if in all of our expecting we miss Christmas? What if we miss that fact that Jesus is coming? Where is the longing and the hope that God might actually show up in the midst of our everyday life? Do we really even expect God to show up? Or is God just on the periphery of everything else we expect this season?

And, let's be honest, do we even want God to show up? There's a part of us that worries that if God shows up, God's probably going to mess up our perfect plans and interrupt our expectations. It's a pretty valid concern because all through the Bible, pretty much any time God shows up, God ruins people's plans and completely messes up their expectations. It's a scary thought. Especially for those of us who like control and order.

But here's what I want us to think about as we enter Advent, as we begin this season of expectations: what if it's our expectations that are messed up? Maybe God actually knows better than us and actually does have good things in store for us. If we believed this we might find ourselves waiting expectantly for what God wants to do in our lives and be willing to let go of what we think is best.

As we begin to explore this theme of expecting, we begin with the story of Mary who was literally expecting the Messiah during this Christmas season. **(Read Luke 1:26-38)** What a nice story! It sounds totally calm and serene and vanilla. Too often, I think, we read these familiar Bible stories more as glossy Christmas cards than the divinely powerful invasions that they are; with the words "Mary was greatly troubled," Luke completely skips over the part where Mary freaks out at being suddenly pregnant. And then there's the angel Gabriel telling Mary "don't be afraid" immediately followed by "you're having a baby." Again, Luke leaves out the part where Mary completely loses it.

If I were re-writing Luke's Christmas story, I might have opted for something a little more realistic: you know, where Mary says, "Excuse me glowing, terrifying angel man that just appeared in my living room...I'm what?! Pregnant? I mean, I know you said not to be afraid, but come on: pregnant? Really? And how is that even possible? I'm a virgin! I am never going to be able to explain this to Joseph!"

It's really easy for us to gloss over the life-changing decision that Mary had before her. We can lose the fact that Mary had to choose to allow God to enter her story. This young woman, newly engaged, had certain expectations about what the next few months would hold, and I'm sure they did not include a pregnant belly. This decision would change everything. Instead

of parties and presents the next few months would be filled with sideways glances and whispered judgments.

In that moment Mary had to let go of visions of wedding parties and family celebrations. She had to face the reality that she might lose Joseph. She had to decide: did she actually believe that God had a plan and that God's plan included her? In the midst of this uncertainty and fear and confusion, Mary uttered these immortal words: "May your word to me be fulfilled." In others words, "I'm scared out of my mind, but let's do this!" Ready or not, Mary found herself expecting.

It's scary to let go of what we have envisioned and to embrace something that we cannot see. It's scary to let go of our vision of the future to embrace an unknown future filled with, well, the unknown! I think that God knows how hard this is for us and so Scripture is filled with verses that encourage us to trust in God's plans:

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jer. 29:11)*

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge [God], and [God] will make straight your paths. (Prov. 3:5-6)*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to [God's] purpose. (Rom. 8:28)*

We can read those over and over and know them by heart but it still won't really prepare us for that moment when we have to live out what we say, what we believe. And the sad reality is that even when we experience God's plans and even though we see the hope and the future God provides, it doesn't make it any easier to say "yes" the next time God taps us on the shoulder and says, "Do not be afraid." We're never ready. We think if we say "yes" to God one time that God will leave us alone, as if God should reward us by never asking us again to change our plans to suit God's purpose. We think it should be smooth, uninterrupted sailing from here on out; but that simply isn't the way it works.

Let's see how it went for Mary...**(Read Luke 2:1-8)**...Fast forward to the end of the story: Mary is nine months pregnant. Now settled into the reality that life is different, she is thrown another curve ball. A census is taken and everyone must register. They didn't have any

convenient government sponsored website that would allow them to register remotely. No, everyone had to travel back to their hometown to register in person.

So, like it or not, Mary hoisted herself onto that donkey and they set off for Bethlehem. The trip was slow and difficult. She spent long days on the open road and long nights in roadside inns. And when she arrived in Bethlehem there was no room, so she gave birth in a stable. I'm not sure what birth story Mary envisioned, but I'm pretty sure it didn't involve a feed trough and farm animals. But there in that barn, in a circumstance she could never have imagined, Mary found herself expecting the Messiah.

The truth is that expecting God to show up invites God to do the unexpected. And often times, most times, almost always, the unexpected is the absolutely last thing that we would choose. The unexpected is scary because we feel much safer, much more in control when we can plan and envision and carefully craft our future. We tend to equate safe with good. We forget that our God is not always safe, but our God is always good.

And this is where it gets real. It's easy to talk about God showing up. It's easy to sing the words "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," but are we actually willing to make space in our lives, to give up control, and to wait expectantly for the Messiah to enter our lives? Do we really know what that means? This Advent we have the chance to join with those who waited expectantly. As Christ's Church, let's choose to expect God to show up at the most inconvenient time, tap us on the shoulder and say "Don't be afraid, but I have a plan for you." In the midst of that scary, uncertain moment may we be brave like Mary and simply choose to say, "I'm scared out of my mind, but let's do this!"

**Prayer:** In this Advent of expectation, O God, draw us together in unity that our praise and worship might echo in these walls and also through our lives. In this Advent of expectation draw us together in mission, that the hope within might be the song we sing, and the melody of our lives. In this Advent of expectation draw us together in service, that the path we follow might lead us from a stable to a glimpse of eternity.

## What to Expect When You're Expecting

Sunday, November 29, 2015 – Advent 1

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 61:1-7 and Luke 1:26-38

Well, it's officially after Thanksgiving, so you know what that means! It's Christmas! We know this because our Starbucks comes in red cups, you can't go anywhere without hearing Christmas carols, and the movie *Elf* is running on at least one TV channel at every hour of the day. From here on out it's a downhill slide into "the most wonderful time of the year." Like it or not, it's time to get ready for Christmas.

As the church, we also take time to get ready for Christmas. This is the beginning of Advent, the season when we take time to prepare our hearts and our lives for the reality that Jesus is coming. The four weeks leading up to Christmas are set apart as a time of expectation and preparation for that moment when Jesus enters the world. It takes us back to those days long ago when the exiles of Israel desperately waited in anticipation for the Messiah to come. This is a season filled with expectation and hope.

Just imagine you are one of the ancient Israelites, a captive in exile, hearing these words from Isaiah...**(Read Isaiah 61:1-7)**...As the Israelites waited, they believed these words to be true and they hoped these words would, at any moment, come to pass. As the church, we join with those exiles during Advent, hoping, waiting, and expecting the Messiah to come and change us and change the world.

Advent-Christmas is a season of expectations, but if we aren't careful we can get caught up expecting all the wrong things. We expect that perfect gift under the tree. We expect to be at home with our families. We expect joy, and peace and love. We expect gingerbread houses and laughter and cocoa and Norman Rockwell moments. We expect snow drifts and jingle bells and candle light.