

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18, 2011
Luke 1:26-38
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

There are a lot of things we are expecting this time of year. We expect to get a few Christmas presents a few days from now. We expect we'll probably indulge in some sweets and maybe even gain a pound or two. We expect some wonderful holiday moments along with a few that are stressful, emotional, or even downright difficult.

Expecting. It's also a word we use for pregnancy, of course. "She's expecting, you know."

I was struck by the title of what is described as the "pregnancy bible", read by 90% of women who read a pregnancy manual. It's called: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. It's meant to be empathetic and reassuring. But the first review I read—no, I'm not pregnant, just curious—said she followed her midwife's advice and threw it away. She thought it was a "misinformed alarming guide to complete freak out." She concluded by saying her anxieties subsided when got rid of the book.

I think a great book title would be: "What to Expect When You Don't Get What You Expect." After all, life has a way of just happening. Think of all the ways that your life has turned out differently than you thought it would. Someone once said, "No insurance policy can quite tame the future." (John Shea)

Sometimes our expectations get in the way. Some say it's better not to have any, so you don't end up disappointed. Yet we're conditioned to think we deserve a near-perfect life with as little pain as possible. That we are entitled to all our dreams coming true.

The only thing is: we don't have control over a lot of things. Life just happens. Poems by Yeats and Eliot use phrases that fit for most of us: *Things fall apart*. And: *no longer at ease*.

Elizabeth and Mary had their lives interrupted in unexpected, unimaginable, unbelievable ways. Two unexpected pregnancies. Elizabeth, living into old age, had long given up on having children. She was dealing with aches and pains, and those increasing "senior moments."

And Mary. Once they were married she looked forward to a long and happy life with Joseph. She was so young. Gabriel's sudden, unexpected announcement out of the blue had shaken her world. She didn't even want to think of all the stares and shame that would certainly come her way.

Mary is perplexed and puzzled and ponders this mysterious interruption in her life. Was it an invitation? A request? A calling? What if she said no? How can this be, she asks?

When unexpected changes come our way . . . when we lose the familiar, the ways we've been at home in the world . . . it brings a time of reassessing. Sometimes even doubt and depression. Yet these events can also jolt us. We begin to face what our lives really are, rather than what we want them to be, or thought they would be.

Three weeks ago about twenty members of this community gathered to reflect on life's transitions in light of Advent spirituality. Most people were living through multiple transitions as I bet many of you are too. If we were to add them up we would be amazed by all the unexpected twists and turns, the unexpected things—the disappointments, the fears, the hopes, the questions we carry with us this day.

Yet like Elizabeth and Mary waiting together, what a privilege it is to be companions to one another on the journey of the unexpected. Maybe that is one of the gifts of a faith community.

When life takes us in a surprising new direction, like Mary, we wonder, how can this be? Maybe we don't know what to do next. Maybe we sense a tug or pull to move in a new direction. Maybe something is coming to birth within us that we can't explain, something not very rational but more real than we can even describe.

And we pray that Mary would teach us her prayer: Let it be.

For those who want the details before agreeing to anything, it's a stretch of the imagination. Moving from "how can this be" to "let it be" is no easy path.

As one writer (Dwight Judy) says, when the unexpected happens and we don't know the way forward, we want a map. We want a manual. We want a direction. And of course, we want security. And instead, what God gives us ... in an adventure. To live our lives more deeply, passionately, reflectively. And to discover in it all who we really are, who God is, and what this thing called life is really about.

Life is a mixture of yin and yang, of active and receptive energies. Most of us Western people are more comfortable with effort, hard work, and taking charge, than with surrender, yielding, letting go. Yet Mary reminds us there is a time to be open. To trust the bigger picture and the hand of God in something not yet clear. Something without form or detail.

Angel Gabriel has pretty hopeful words for puzzled, pondering, perplexed Mary. "With God all things are possible." Yet God is no Santa Claus, fulfilling our every wish. We don't get everything we want in life. So what is this impossible possibility that God offers to us?

Maybe it's this simple: when what you hope for is not what you get, life is still possible. When you don't think you can go on ... when the unexpected seems overwhelming there is a hope, a new beginning coming to birth. Then, perhaps more than ever anything *is* possible. Because at those most vulnerable, most human moments, our hearts are most open to pray: Let it be.

That's not to say there won't be tears. Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from, and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next."

Most of us have lived through enough Christmases to know that things don't always turn out the way we expect they will. Sounds like real life. We will be caught off guard by a surprising emotion, a strange disappointment, a poignant memory. Perhaps those unexpected moments hold pregnant possibility: as we hold gently our deep human need. And welcome again the God who comes among us. Shattering expectations. And meeting us with grace beyond what we can imagine.

Amen. Let it be.