

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 1, 2019

“Under Wraps: God Is Expectant”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Sermon

Let us pray. God, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So let me start out by getting it out of the way. Congratulations, Hoos. I said at the beginning of the season, this was your year to win, and you did it. You're the better team *this year*. Maybe in 15 more you'll win again.

Has that ever been you in that video? Maybe currently reflective of your life right now? In this video we see a woman who is simply going through the motions, staring off into space, maybe daydreaming of what life *could* be like, but then coming back to reality and maybe thinking it'll never be as she dreams it could be.

Life happens that way all too easily, where we get caught up in just simply going through the motions. Even among the most creative amongst us, we human beings are creatures of habit by nature. "Stick with what works" is what I always say when it comes to maintaining my own personal comfort. Every time we go out to eat in the same restaurants we usually go to, I think about getting something different. I'm thinking about it, I'm thinking about it, I'm thinking about it...I'm almost there, but when it comes time to give the order, I default to whatever it is that I always get time after time after time

because I know what to expect. I know what it's going to be. I know I will most likely like it, unless they screw it up.

But if it's true about life in general, then it's also true about our spiritual lives as well, where we can too easily get caught up in going through the motions. Where we never really expect anything different. We never really expect anything new. We never really expect anything to change. And some say, well, that's good. And over time I've come to realize that those in the church who are change-averse are expressing a desire for comfort. I get that, because we're comfortable with what we know.

But as we shift into Advent and we begin thinking about Christmas, I, like many of you, have started listening to Christmas music. I'm one of those that'll listen to Christmas music in the middle of summer, all right? I'm not an Advent purist, thank goodness, as we sang a Christmas song this morning.

But so much of Christmas music is nostalgic, isn't it? Wishing for times of long ago. "Here we are as in olden days, happy golden days of yore." This is one of those times of year that's repetitive by nature. We put up the same decorations as last year. We attend the same functions and parties as last year. We sing the same songs as last year. We watch the same Christmas movies, like *Die Hard*, as last year. We eat the same food. We see the same people. And, let's face it, some of us re-gift the same gifts. And in church, we hear the same story, about a baby born in a stable, laid in a manger, and stories about the shepherds and wise men.

And so today I have an interactive element here in the sermon. It's a pop quiz. The first question is: In which of the four gospels do we read of the birth of Jesus? **Luke, Matthew.** We only read of the birth of Jesus in two of the four gospels: Matthew and Luke. Mark and John do not have the story of Jesus' birth in them.

Next question zeroes in a little more. In which of those two gospels do we read about the wise men? **Matthew.** And in which of the two gospels do we read about the shepherds? If you watch *Charlie Brown Christmas*, you know this story. **Luke.** For two different emphases, which is another sermon for another time, we read about the wise men in Matthew, and the shepherds only in Luke. And they're not smushed in there together, like we do in a typical nativity scene.

Last question: What was the wise men's occupation, and how can we tell? They were firemen. You know how we can tell? 'Cause they came from "*afar*." Come on! I told that one last year. It never gets old.

So what I hope you realized here is how easy it is to fall into these traps where we assume everything there is to know about these stories. Over time we just shove them all together like the figures in the nativity scene and stick them all in there together. Just

like we already know what's in the boxes of decorations that we pull out year after year. Just like we think we already know how the day or the week or the year, even, will play out. We never really expect anything new.

Well, it's a new sermon series for Advent, as we begin today, called *Under Wraps: The Gift We Never Expected*. And the reason I was drawn to this sermon series is that it's different. It's a change from the usual Advent themes of peace, joy, hope, and love. And today we begin with the idea that God is **expectant**.

Jessica LaGrone, who is one of the authors of *Under Wraps*, points out that we might think that Luke begins right off the bat with the story of Jesus' birth. But actually Luke begins his gospel with the story of an expectant mother. And no, it's not the expectant mother who we think Luke would begin with. Instead, Luke begins his gospel with Elizabeth and Zechariah, who had longed for a child and seemed to be well beyond childbearing years, until Zechariah was serving his term as a priest in the temple in the Holy of Holies, and the angel told him that Elizabeth would bear a son and they were to name him John, otherwise known to us as John the Baptist.

And then we encounter Elizabeth's younger relative, Mary. Mary was at the opposite end of the spectrum from Elizabeth. Mary was young, unwed, she was a virgin. And yet the angel appeared to her also and explained that she was chosen by God to bring God's son into the world.

In many ways these two women represent so many of us, and many of us of the people of God in particular. On the one hand, there are those of us who are mature, not just in age, but also in faith. We've grown comfortable with the status quo, the way things are. We may not particularly like it, but it's comfortable, at least. It's easy to go through the motions, to not really expect much from God. Certainly nothing new or exciting. Life with God becomes essentially routine and little else. If that's you, the good news is that God is still in the business of shaking things up, of fulfilling promises made long ago.

On the other hand, there are those of us who are young not just in faith, but in age also. And life is almost constantly about change as one grows and matures, but there can still be routine and normal expectations. There can still be a degree of just going through the motions, where life is just about making good grades and being a good boy or girl. Doing well in sports, participating in extracurricular activities, getting into college, making more good grades. Making new friends, staying in touch with old friends. Graduating from college, finding a job, finding another job. Getting married, finding another job. Having kids, finding two jobs, maybe. It's easy to get caught up in going through the motions of what society expects of us, like Mary did. The good news for you is that God is still in the business of interrupting our plans, what we expect from

life, to show us what *God* expects in our lives. And pretty much 100 percent of the time, whatever God expects from our lives is infinitely better than what we planned or expected.

At the end of high school, my senior year of high school, I met a girl that was a junior and we started dating. We dated on and off all four years at Tech. I even almost bought her a ring. I was so for sure that she was “the one.” I was so head over heels in love even though we fought like cats and dogs all the time. I was just so sure that she was the one. Thank goodness she wasn’t. But then I became a pastor and during the first year of pastoring I was single, and trying to date as a pastor gets rather interesting. The inevitable “So what do you do?” question comes up. “Well, I’m a United Methodist pastor.” “Oh really? That’s...that’s nice,” they would often say. And I tried so hard to date, to *find my wife*, and so finally at the end of that year, I prayed a Hail Mary kind of prayer (like the Hail Mary pass we should have thrown at the end of that...oh wait, we did throw it, and they intercepted it) of, “God, I’m done trying to date. I’m done trying to find her. Make it happen. When it’s her, knock me upside the head so I know it’s her, and we’ll take it from there.” And lo and behold, once God finally got us together, we got married two days shy of six months of meeting each other, and now here we are 15 years later this month. Love you, honey.

But Bishop Cho, our last Bishop, who is a man of deep prayer, said that prayer has got to be more than just a “Hello, God, how are you?” kind of check-in in the morning. It’s a good place to start, but he said prayer has got to be prayed with expectation. “God, do something only *You* can do. God, do something to bring Yourself glory and not us.” What if we prayed with expectation, leaving room for surprise? This expectant God that we serve expects us to pray like that. Our God waits in expectation for us to respond to His love offered to us through Jesus Christ.

And so what are you expecting from God this Advent and Christmas? Is it just more of the same? Or maybe something so great and so unexpected that you never thought it possible before? Because that’s what Advent is. It’s waiting. But it’s waiting in expectation, in preparation. Not just for the moment when we can tear into our presents under the tree. Not even just waiting for that special candlelight Communion and carols service. But also waiting in expectation for that great and glorious day when we will gather around the heavenly banquet with Christ once and for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.