

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Great Expectations”**

**Micah 5:2 – 4  
Luke 1:39 – 45**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**December 20, 2015**

I don't know about you, but for me, the end of December is the most *expectant* time of the whole year. I mean, I have high hopes and great expectations in several different areas as the year comes to a close... and I've had such expectations pretty much every year of my life!

Of course, when I was a kid, I had great expectations for what Santa would leave me under the Christmas tree. I knew my grandparents would give me socks and underwear; and even my parents weren't immune from wrapping up the occasional sweater. But Santa... he was cool, man! Santa gave me electric football; and a carom board; and a super-snazzy slot car track that took up most of the family room. Santa was all about games, and toys, and bikes, and football helmets; so I always had *lots* of expectations as his annual visit drew near!

As I got a little older, I started having expectations about college football... and especially about the Rose Bowl game on January first. And that's because, during the four years that I was in high school, my beloved Buckeyes played in the Rose Bowl every single year... four in a row. And that was cause for dangerously high expectations, because, if you think I'm an Ohio State fan now... you should have seen me when I was a teenager, and every Buckeye loss sent me into the doldrums for weeks! Of course, the Buckeyes *lost* three of those four Rose Bowl games... but we're not going to get into *that* this morning!

And then somewhere along the line, I started having expectations about my various New Years' resolutions... and how I was going to change my life for the better in the year ahead. So, over the years I resolved to get in shape, lose weight, read more books, learn to play the guitar, be more patient, eat more vegetables, and so on, and so on. Some resolutions I've done pretty well on... like reading more, and eating more vegetables. And some I've been pretty abysmal with... like being more patient, and learning to play the guitar. But either way, the existence of resolutions makes this time of year all the more expectant.

Now we could all add many other items of expectation to this list... but you get the idea. This is a time for some great expectations! And that's fitting... because, in our lesson this morning from the Gospel of Luke, we spent some time with a couple of women who were cherishing some pretty great expectations of their own... Mary, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus; and her cousin Elizabeth, the soon-to-be mother of John the Baptist.

Now, according to an earlier section of Luke chapter one, when Mary received the annunciation from the angel Gabriel that she would be giving birth to the Christ Child, Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy with John... a fact to which the angel alluded as he assured a very frightened and apprehensive Mary that God was more than able to bring about the amazing events which had been promised.

As Luke tells us, in answer to Mary's question, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" the angel said: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

And we can imagine Mary's reaction. "What? Good old Elizabeth... unable to have children her whole life, is pregnant? She's also carrying a very special and surprising baby? This I gotta see!" And so, Mary decides to pay a visit to her kinswoman... in order to compare notes about their history-making pregnancies, and to share in each other's blessedly happy news.

And when Mary arrived at her cousin's home in the hill country of Judea, the text makes it clear that while both of these ladies were expecting unexpectedly, they were expecting with great expectations. Listen again to Luke's description of the scene:

*"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 what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!'"*

Now, keep in mind that there were many reasons why each of these women might be something less than thrilled about the fact that they were soon to become mothers. For example, in Elizabeth's case, although Luke doesn't report her actual age, he makes it clear that she was an older woman... and old enough to be considered past the age of childbearing. Even today we know that later-in-life pregnancies can be a little risky... and that extra care must be taken by the mother-to-be to ensure that both her, and her child's, health aren't placed in jeopardy. We can only imagine how dangerous such a pregnancy would have been in the ancient world... where deaths during childbirth were a common occurrence, even in the best of circumstances.

And Mary's situation was far more dangerous than Elizabeth's... as at least Elizabeth was married, and no one questioned the fact of Zechariah's paternity. Mary, of course, was *not* married... although she was engaged to Joseph; and being found with child in her youthful and unmarried state was more than just a community scandal, it would likely have led to Mary's being kicked out of the synagogue, and possibly being subject to a sentence of stoning.

So, although our text doesn't really go into any of the dangerous details, there really were some serious risks and perils facing each of these two women. They were both sailing out into hazardous and uncharted waters. Yet, according to Luke, how did they react to the precarious situation in which they found themselves? With joy! With hope! With trust! With celebration so heartfelt that little embryonic John the Baptist gave an intrauterine whoop, and tried to high-five his momma right in the womb!

In spite of all the drab, dreary, and dangerous signs to the contrary... which populated the world in which they lived; these women knew that God was up to something great among them. They knew that God was going to change the world through them. They knew that God had His loving arms around them, and that He would bless them, and watch over them, and carry them through all the challenging days that were ahead. At this point, they didn't know how; they didn't

know when; and they didn't know where... they only knew that God *would* follow through on the promises He had made. And that was enough for them.

And so, when they met each other that day in that small village in the hills of Judea, they could hug, and laugh, and cry, and rejoice... at the happy good news that they were both going to be mothers; and at the even happier news that their children, and especially Mary's child, were going to usher in the kingdom of God. They had great expectations that God was about to do something wonderful; and surely, in that family time of women comparing notes about preparing for their babies' arrivals... they must have wondered and pondered over what it all meant, and how the world would soon be changed.

Now, as we know from the rest of the gospel record, this happy scene of motherly celebration didn't last forever. Eventually, Elizabeth disappears from the biblical stage altogether; and Mary is often portrayed as being fearful and confused at her son's increasingly provocative behavior. In fact, at one point she goes to Jesus and tries to take Him home, believing that He'd lost His senses and was putting His life at risk from the Jewish authorities... who were becoming increasingly angry over His messianic proclamations. And, surely, Mary's experience at the foot of Jesus' cross, as described in the Gospel of John... was a far cry from that happy day with Elizabeth so many years earlier, as they both stood on the threshold of motherhood.

Yet, through it all, in happy times and sad... in good times and bad... when everything made sense, and when nothing seemed to be going right at all; we can only assume that Mary and Elizabeth held on tightly to their great expectations! The hope of God's promise; the truth of God's love; the power of God's determination to save His people from their sins. These, we may trust, were tightly held in Mary's heart and soul, and in Elizabeth's... all the days of their lives. And they knew that one day... they would see their great expectations become an even greater reality!

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own life of Christian discipleship; and our own *need* to keep our hearts, and souls, and minds connected to those great expectations which were held so joyously by Mary and Elizabeth. The good news of God's saving acts in Jesus is *good news* to us, for the very same reasons that it was *good news* to Mary and Elizabeth and everyone else in their world.

They needed hope, in their world of chaos and uncertainty; and so, too, do we. They needed reassurance that their sin and foolishness would be completely forgiven; and so, too, do we. They needed to know that God still held their lives in the power of His loving arms; and so, too, do we. Hope, grace, mercy, and the peace which only God can give... were the great expectations which caused Mary and Elizabeth to rejoice when they saw each other that day in the hills of Judea. And they are still the great expectations which can, and should, cause us to rejoice this morning! Because all of the promise which came to young Mary when the angel told her that she would bear God's Son... also comes to you, and to me! Because that Son grew up to live for us, and to die for us, and to be gloriously raised for us!

As we make our way through these few remaining days till Christmas, I encourage each of us to take a moment and recall the great expectations that we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's remember that Jesus came not just to do some profound religious thing... but to open the way to God for us; and to give our lives meaning and hope; and to make of us the people that our Heavenly Father truly wants us to be. Those are some great things to expect! Those are some great gifts to receive! Let's see that we do receive them! On Christmas, and all the days of our life! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!