

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM GOD

Luke 1:26–56

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Our Scripture this morning really focuses on three events: the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the visit of Mary to Elizabeth, and Mary's song. Whenever we take a Scripture, whether it's this one or any Scripture, we are attempting not only to understand what happened but how it applies to our life now. As I've had the joy of taking the leisurely stroll through Scripture in my own study this week, it strikes me that this passage from God's Word teaches us about some things that we can expect from God. There are eight of them I find in this passage.

I. The first thing we can expect from God is to expect the unexpected.

That's true of the Christmas story and that's true of our own life. Who would have possibly imagined that God would bring the king of the entire universe to earth in such a way, to such a remote place, such a common person? Who could have fashioned it or understood it in those terms? He skipped past Caesar's palace and the Temple in Jerusalem and came to Mary at Nazareth.

Some time ago, during a Christmas Eve service, I gave a little message on the way that I would change the Christmas story to make it less unexpected. I would have given Joseph a dream three months before the journey to Bethlehem so he could have gotten Mary there without the kind of hazards of the trip. I would have sent the angels to the innkeeper rather than to the shepherds and let him know that he'd better put them up. I would have kept the star shining so the wise men could have avoided Herod. I would have, in fact, skipped the shepherds altogether since they're incidental and unimportant to the story. And I would have terminated Herod, in order to save the

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babies of Bethlehem and avoid the holy family's flight to Egypt. There are all kinds of things that I would have changed about the Christmas story, had I planned it.

But God does the unexpected. And He does that in your life and He does that in mine. I think if any of you took an inventory of where you are today and what you'd have expected to have happened five or ten years ago, you'd find that God has permitted or allowed or instigated a lot of unexpected things in your life. Some of them, seemingly for the good and some of them seemingly have turned out to be tragic for you. If God is doing things differently than we would do them, it simply means that He's doing them better than we would do them. I think that's kind of the bottom line of God's will and the working out of God's ways in our life. If He's doing them differently than we would do them, it means He's doing it better than we would do them. Watching God work on the landscape of our life is like coming to a great artist as he's beginning work on his canvas. You see him make the first bold strokes across the canvas, indicating the background of blue or green or brown or whatever basic tone he's going to work with in that landscape. It may be that, as you watch the additional strokes, you see the order that will emerge out of the artist's mind and it would seem to you that the picture is somehow being poorly painted or poorly started. But you cannot judge the work until the artist is done. We cannot judge God's work in the world or in our lives until He has completed the painting that He has commenced.

True with the Christmas story, true with our life. Let Him go ahead and paint on His canvas of history.

We can expect from God the unexpected.

II. A second thing to expect from God is that every common person in every common home is known to God.

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If there's anything we can treasure and gain from the Gospels, and especially the Gospel of Luke, it is the elevation and the dignity and the worth of the common person. I think I've shared before, perhaps, that when I was a freshman in college I was bitten with the notion that, in order to really amount to anything in life, you had to do something great for God. I was having a conversation with a graduating senior and asked him what he was going to do, what his ambitions were in life. He said to me words which I thought were blasphemous, "I just want to be an ordinary person." I grew up in too many missionary meetings to want to be an ordinary person. How terrible that anyone should dedicate their lives to being an ordinary person. But now that a few years have been spent running around the track of life, I can see the wisdom in that. God has called the overwhelming majority of His people, not to leave their places of occupation, not to do anything great in terms of getting into the history books of the world or the church, but to be just ordinary people—extraordinary people living for Christ in ordinary situations.

The great thing about the Gospels is that the events that happened were all happening to people just like you and me. Mary is an ordinary person and Nazareth was an ordinary place. Nazareth wasn't even mentioned in the Old Testament. We know it to be 22 miles from the Mediterranean, to its west, and 15 miles from the lake of Galilee, to its east. It is on the southern slopes of the Lebanon mountain range and the northern edge of the Jezrel valley, just a little town nestled away in a valley, tucked away in some low rolling hills or mountain slopes. Maybe the town even had a sullied reputation since it appears to be the place where the caravans going from Egypt to Syria might stay overnight. In fact, Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Perhaps, sort of a reflection on the moral character of the town when it is proprietor

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for people passing through. But God had Nazareth on His map—33 degrees north latitude and 35 degrees east longitude. He had it on His map.

And He had Mary on His map. And He has your home on His map and your person on His map. God seeks to meet us where we are. He doesn't lift Mary through an angelic messenger up into heaven and take her out of earth in order to give her the revelation. He simply sends the angel down to her, because He is going to make her life and her home a holy place, a place of His dwelling.

And just as it was the purpose of the Father that Jesus should physically become present in Mary's womb, so it is the purpose of the Father that Jesus become spiritually present in each one of us; that each of our homes become His dwelling place. God seeks to meet us where we are. If you go through the Gospel of Luke, you will find that there are at least thirteen times in the Gospel of Luke—that I counted as I did this little study—where the home becomes the center of divine action. The home becomes a place where lives are transformed. The home becomes a place where fellowship, wonderful fellowship, is enjoyed. The home becomes a place of learning. The home becomes a place of healing.

What great goals to have in our home as God touches the ordinary—that our homes will be places of life transformation, homes of fellowship, homes for learning, and homes for healing. Some years ago, I was talking with Rosiland Rinker. She travels a lot in her ministry, teaching people about prayer. She was reflecting about how every time she went into a hotel room or place where she had never been, she just took a moment, as she entered, to get on her knees and acknowledge the presence of Jesus in that place. I think there's so much wisdom in doing that. Taking the time, in the places where we dwell, to have that moment of meditation where we visually acknowledge Jesus' presence in that ordinary place. Maybe your kitchen is a place of

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conflict. Maybe your bedroom is a place of conflict. Maybe your family room is a place of conflict. The Lord wants to move His presence into that area, to bring His healing presence, His learning presence, His life-transforming presence into that moment and into that situation. We can expect God to know us personally, to know our homes.

III. The third thing that we can expect from God is that He will act with simplicity and with courtesy.

I am struck by how wonderfully the character of God is represented through the Christmas story, and especially all through the Gospels. Simplicity. When Gabriel appears, it's just straight out. He's just there with Mary. There's no retinue that accompanies Gabriel. There's no symphonic music playing in the background and orchestral score on the order of *Chariots of Fire* to stir the embers of Mary's emotions, so that she might be prepared for the entrance of so grand a being as Gabriel. There is no announcer to herald his appearance—"Now comes Gabriel, Mary!" It's just simplicity. Directness.

And even common courtesy. The angel says "Hello!" or "Greetings!" He is immediately concerned to set her at ease. He is aware that she is frightened of his appearance and presence, and so he is concerned to make her at home in light of the staggering announcement that he had to give her—he was concerned that she be at ease.

How like the character of God. To come to us with simplicity and graciousness. All of that bears on our relationship with one another. The admonition in Scripture to be kind to one another flows, not out of the idea of the idea that God is just giving us one more law to live with, but that being kind to one another is part of God's character and expressing that in our lives is to follow after Him. Courtesy in our own lives finds the presence of certain words that have great power in family and personal living, words like "Please" and "Thank you" and "I'm sorry" and "I think

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you're wonderful" and "Can I help you?" All of those words, I think, speak out of God's character.

So many times I think we make wrong assumptions about God. I'm amazed at how many people have an idea about God that is in direct contrast to what the Scriptures reveal to us about the God of grace. We falsely assume—because of our background or the presence of sin in our life, because we have that flaw that comes out of Adam and is perpetuated by our own wrong choices—that God is out to get us, that He's waiting for an excuse to take some action against us. But all along, God is really the God of grace, the God of courtesy.

I had a student in my class. When I gave the first exam of the semester, I saw the student's name on the exam...there were eleven essay questions on the exam and he didn't answer one. He didn't even make an attempt. I was furious. I figured, if I spend my time teaching, the students ought to spend their time learning! A crazy concept of teaching! I thought he was really laying down on the job and defying me. So I wrote this real nasty note on the bottom of his test. "If you ever do this again I will throw you out of the class and I will not let you back in. I refuse to teach a student who makes no effort." Fortunately, I didn't have to turn the paper back to him for a day or two and I got to thinking about it. "Maybe you've got a wrong assumption about the student. How do you know that he doesn't want to make an effort? You're just thinking that's the case. Why don't you check?" So I got out my pen, and took the exam and I very carefully crossed out, word by word, this long paragraph I wrote. I double-checked it to see if you could read underneath what I had crossed out, and crossed it out again. Went back and crossed it out the third time. I knew it was thoroughly, thoroughly gone. Then I just wrote, on the very bottom, where there was still some white paper left, "Please see me after class." And he did. He came up and saw me after class. I said, "What's the problem? Why didn't you answer the questions on the

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exam?” He said, “It’s because I don’t speak or understand English very well.” I felt so good that I had crossed out what I had said.

I wonder how many times we have an expectation about God that isn’t true at all. That God is just waiting for an excuse to “X” us out, when all along He’s waiting for a reason to include us. And He’s found that reason in His great love and care for us. God will always treat us with courtesy. That courtesy flows out of the character of God’s grace. Courtesy is an aspect of just being graceful, a graciousness. If there’s anything I see as a great need in our life individually, it is the need for grace. The need to give people grace. The need to be wrapped up in the tolerance of God’s love.

I think that when grace is really proclaimed, as it ought to be, if it is proclaimed accurately, it will raise the kinds of questions that Paul has to deal with in Romans. If you preach and live grace thoroughly enough, it will immediately raise the question, “If that’s the truth, if grace is so real, then we can really go out and do anything we want, can’t we?” The legalist sort of needs the rules to live with. But the person who really knows God and His grace never worries about going out and doing anything he wants to, since grace so profoundly shapes our lives, we have that instinct to want to reach out and do what God wants us to do.

I have a sense that there are people here today that need a great measure of grace to come upon your life. A great sense of how much God cares for you and how the problems you’re having and the struggles you’re going through have not at all written you out of God’s kingdom or written you off of God’s care. God acts toward you with simplicity and courtesy.

IV. Then a fourth thing that we can expect from God is that what God does always turns out to be more wonderful than we had ever dreamed.

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Mary could have never dreamed that she, as a virgin, would bear a son who would be God's Son, who would sit on David's throne, and who would have a kingdom that would never end. Think of it! A son unlike any other son ever born. Even kings have an end to their kingdom. But Mary's son... His kingdom would never end.

These great promises of God went beyond Mary's wildest dreams. God's great promises to us go beyond our wildest dreams as well. Too often we can easily let God's promises toward us slip into a kind of ordinariness. His promises are extraordinary. "To as many as received Him, to them He gave power to become the children of God" (John 1:12).

Those who are God's children are also the heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ Jesus. We have the promise of life everlasting. The promise that God is working good in the midst of all of our pains—promises. Great promises. They take a while, as in Mary, to be fulfilled. Mary did not see the fulfillment of promises made to her within one day or one month or one year. It was decades before she lived to see the fulfillment of all that had been spoken. The promises have that nature to them. They're promises because they're not all expressed in fulfillment, in the immediate time. They wait to happen. But they're true.

Imagine if someone found a way, medically, to block the aging process that's going on in us so that we could begin getting use to living, unless we had a car accident or something fell on us, we could begin getting accustomed to living a thousand years. I got to thinking about that the other day, and I got excited. That would reshape my understanding of life. Mid-life crisis wouldn't hit me till I was around four hundred or five hundred. The ramifications of that get really exciting—living a thousand years. We would bestow every kind of honor upon a person who came up with that sort of blocking process to the aging mechanisms in our bodies.

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God, of course, in the person of Jesus Christ, has gone way beyond that and made us exceeding and great and precious promises; the promises of life everlasting; the promises of being in eternity with Him, of His “tabernacling” or dwelling among us, the promises of richness of life and quality and quantity beyond comparison. Whatever we may expect from God, we may be sure that whatever it is will turn out more wonderful than we could ever dream.

V. A fifth thing that we can expect from God is that He will not act for us or through us without our consent.

Mary offers herself as the Lord’s servant. “Let it be unto me according to Thy Word.” May it be to me as you have said. That entire great announcement that Gabriel brings to Mary needs connection for it to come to pass. It will need Mary’s assent. God is able to do very little for us without our consent.

Someone has said that God really does nothing on earth that is not the result of prayer. I got to thinking about that this week. Many times we raise questions like, “Why should I pray? God’s going to do it anyway.” I thought about that statement that someone had made. God does nothing on earth that is not the direct result of prayer. I began thinking of all the things I knew that were happening in the kingdom of God that were rich and powerful and wonderful I realized that at the base of every one of them was prayer. Why does God use prayer? Because He has chosen to limit His work on earth to our consent. Prayer is that shaping of our consent that gives God the permission to act in our lives.

Is God seeking your consent in any area of your life? Seeking consent from you to make changes in your personal life, changes in your home, changes maybe in an area of secret sin in your life? For God to act through you, He must have your consent.

VI. We can expect God to have at least one other person who will affirm and encourage us.

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It's striking that after Mary had the great revelation, and became expectant with Jesus, she thinks of the one person who will understand and will encourage her, and she goes to that person in the hill country of Judah—Elizabeth. And sure enough, Elizabeth does exactly that. When she meets Mary, she calls her “Blessed.” Elizabeth is not so concerned about, “Here I've been given this great miracle of a child born to me, and now this child has to give way to another child who's going to be greater.” She lays all that aside. She's a true encourager. And she affirms and blesses Mary, who has come to her.

It's important, in our life, that we seek out people who will affirm and encourage us. All of us can perhaps think of people in our lives who have touched us in that way. I was at a lunch this week and was sitting at a table with Dr. David Hubbard, president of Fuller Theological Seminary. I was sharing with him that I was preaching through Luke right now on Sunday mornings and went back to the days of Seminary when Dr. Hubbard was a student before me at Fuller Seminary. We both had Dr. Clarence Roddy as preaching professor. I recounted how my first sermon in homiletics I preached a really wild, really off-the-wall kind of sermon, and sort of yelled at the people, which was the custom that I had in preaching. When I stepped down to receive the criticisms from the class, they just laid me low. Dr. Roddy came up, and put his arm around me in the middle of the class, standing in the aisle—I can still see him doing this, this great American Baptist preacher, and said, “You leave my Ozark hillbilly preacher alone!” He told the other guys in our class. That saved me! Dr. Roddy saved me for the ministry. And Dr. Hubbard laughed and said, “And you got the A from Dr. Roddy. And I got the C, because in an evangelistic sermon I was preaching, in my conclusion I used a Latin phrase, and Dr. Roddy didn't feel that was appropriate in an evangelistic sermon.” That cracked me up, Dr. Hubbard getting a C from Dr. Roddy. Dr. Roddy was an affirmer, and we need affirmers in our life.

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How about husbands coming home from work in the evening and meeting your wife as she greets you at the door and saying to her, “Blessed are you among wives!” Or maybe women doing that with your husband, “Blessed are you among husbands!” “Blessed are you among children!” to our children. Or children to parents, “Blessed are you among parents!” Or to friends, “Blessed are you among friends!”

Elizabeth is that true encourager who does not let her job be stolen because someone else has been given an even greater privilege.

VII. The seventh thing we can expect from God is for Him to value our praise to Him.

We see that in Mary’s song, The Magnificat. One of the things I’ve appreciated about Mary is her depth of understanding of God’s character and His ways. Her song is really built from the phraseology in Hanna’s song, the mother of Samuel. And also the phraseology of the Psalms and Prophets. It would suggest that Mary had access to the Old Testament and had committed good portions of it to memory so that, in that spontaneous moment, when she meets Elizabeth, she sings that new song, which she has fashioned from the old songs. I would suspect that Mary’s song became Mary’s song for all those decades of time. She sees God as bringing in Jesus, a moral, social, and economic revolution—changing things. Some persons’ idea of praise and worship is the endless repetition of simple phrases and chords which tend to elicit a worship mood or spiritual catatonic state. Mary’s worship was with feeling, but it was also with perception, with depth, with power in language, in poetic verse. She brings to God the worship of her spirit but she also brings the worship of her mind and she sings to God her new song. God values our praise when we worship Him in spirit and in truth.

VIII. Finally, we can expect God to lead us, one step at a time.

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That's the way God does deal with us. We're not given much of a glimpse beyond today. There are a lot of things Gabriel could have shared with Mary, but he didn't. He could have shared with her the struggle that Joseph would go through and how their betrothal would be in doubt. He could have shared with her that she would face suspicion in her hometown. He would have jarred her with the news that she would have to go down south to Bethlehem to give birth late in her pregnancy. He could have disturbed her with the news that she would go two years in exile to Egypt. He could have told her that she would spend twenty-eight uneventful years at Nazareth when she returned from Egypt. In fact, the angel didn't even give her a book telling her how to raise Jesus. I know how she got along without Dr. Benjamin Spock, but I don't know how she got along without Dr. James Dobson! He didn't tell her that the Son would be crucified and she would one day stand at His cross. Although later Simeon would later tell her that a sword would one day pierce her soul, but what that meant no one knew at the time. He didn't give her the good news, either, that her Son, having been crucified, would be raised; that she, Mary, would be one of the hundred and twenty present on the Day of Pentecost and the birth of the Church. Nor did he tell her, as church tradition affirms, that she would die at Ephesus far, far away from her native home.

It's so frustrating to wait, but wait we must. Much of life is kind of living between great events. God does not put tomorrow's joys or tomorrow's troubles in today's suitcase. Today's suitcase will only hold today's joys and troubles, and its all I can get in it, so there's no use trying to put more in it because I couldn't lift it. So I must live with today.

Those who receive God's grace, always have the assurance, like Mary, "The Lord is with you."

That's what you can expect from God. The Lord is with you.

Closing Prayer

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Our Father, we're thankful that You come to us as one who does things that are expected. We can always expect You to be the God of grace and mercy who delights us with Your surprises, with precious and wonderful things for us and healing in life where we least expect it, and promise where we least hope for it. I pray that this time today, in Your presence and in Your Word, will be a great encouragement to every heart here. That we will come to You with ever-increasing faith, discovering what to expect from You and lift up our eyes from our own problems and our own needs to You, who come into our lives, and grace our common homes and common names with Your presence, with Your Lordship. As we come to these moments of prayer, we ask Your presence to be especially on all who come and respond. In Christ's name. Amen.