

We are all out of sequence in our Gospel readings this Advent – We started with the end of the world, moved backward to the adult John the Baptist, further back with the angel's Gabriel's announcement to Mary of her "unplanned pregnancy," and today we go back further still to that same angel's announcements to John the Baptist's father that he and his aged wife Elizabeth would soon experience an unplanned pregnancy of their own. "Unplanned pregnancy" – an interesting phrase, as though conception were some mysterious process. But new life will find its way out.

I ministered one night to a family at a hospital, to whom a new baby had come very unexpectedly, unprepared for – they hadn't even known their 16-year-old daughter was pregnant, and she hid it well with baggy clothes. They'd brought her to the hospital that day because of her severe stomach pain. And now this... baby, unwanted, arriving amid trauma and secrecy and betrayal. But very much here. Whatever else was going on, there was also this new life, with all her possibilities intact, all her promises of love open and available. It was very much the end of the world as that family knew it.

And the beginning of a new one.

When I left them, they were making that hard transition from seeing the world the way it had appeared, to seeing how it was now, absolutely upside down.

Today we explore what it means to live expectantly in an upside down world. It's hard to anticipate something like a new baby when you had no idea that was a possibility – and yet two families in our sacred stories faced just that event, one way earlier than they'd envisioned, and one years too late.

Yet we see Zechariah unable to accept that such a thing could be, now; and Elizabeth embrace this blessing, seeing it as a vindication after long years of suffering – as though some part of her had never lost hope.

We see Mary and Joseph open up to blessing, though it's not their plan, and will cost them dearly. That is living expectantly.

How do you live expecting blessing?

How do we live, expecting blessing in the world we inhabit today?

When we've been braced for disaster for the past year?

The dread disease suddenly on our doorsteps;

the sudden transition to new ways of doing virtually everything;

the real-life murders playing endlessly on our screens;
the social unrest and injustice; the roller-coaster election;
the never knowing what awful thing is going to happen next...

All of this generates a trauma response,
which gets in the way of our ability to expect grace.

Or is it the other way around? Can cultivating our spiritual sense of expectancy
soften the effects of trauma, and make us more resilient?

There are at least three components to living expectantly –

Living by faith in what we cannot see, but believe God is up to –
which means trusting in God’s goodness and expecting blessing in every
situation, even ones in which a lot of “un-blessing” is being manifest.
We learn to trust that our God who is in the business of blessing will bring
blessing to us no matter what else is going on – and can even bring blessing
out of the worst experiences. Which does not mean those are God’s will for us –
if God has given human’s free will, then God does not stay the hand of those
who would do harm. But Jesus has also promised to never leave us or forsake
us, so we can trust in his presence and healing power within the worst of times.

If we are to learn to live expecting the best of times, because God is good,
we also need to learn hold lightly our own expectations.

Our longings and desires and anxieties are real for us, but we don’t need to let
them run the show. We become aware of when our expectations – of other
people, of life to be a certain way, either good or bad, have taken hold and let go.
We learn to tune our awareness of God-Life inside us and around us,
letting go of what we want – and dread –
in favor of what we perceive God is bringing into being.

Like Mary, we become bearers of God’s life into the world, into the lives of other
people. We become filled with a life not wholly our own, as we give God room.

And that is the third component of Living Expectantly in an upside-down world –
Making space. New life demands space. A pregnant woman will find her body
being rearranged as this new life takes up residency –
organs squished, breathing different, hormones generating new impulses.
An expectant family will need to rearrange the space in their home,
make a space for this new life.

So do we make space for the new life God is bringing into us. Amen.

Luke 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."