

Great Expectations

Luke 1:39-56

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Imagine in your mind a pregnant woman. What do you see?

Men? An especially beautiful woman. One who is sometimes haggard and worn.

Imagine it's your wife who is pregnant: what are your expectations for the child? The joy of having a little boy who can go out and play football with me, or of a little girl whom I can protect.

Women, what do you see? Imagine it's you that is pregnant. What do you see? "Oh no, not again!" or "thank you, Lord, finally!" or the fear of pain, or morning-sickness, or delight. What are your expectations for your child? In spite of differences around the world, the common refrain of women from around the world is "I hope that my baby is healthy".

What about Mary, the mother of Jesus? Do we know what she saw in herself? What she expected of her child?

We do. But before we see what it was, let's put her expectation in context.

The People of Israel had been pregnant with expectation of God's action on their behalf for hundreds of years leading up to the time of Jesus' birth. They had tasted what God would bring forth for them when, freed from the land of Egypt, they had tasted of the milk and honey in a land flowing with both. They had tasted what power over their enemies would begin to be like when, under David, Israel began to rule its corner of the world. The shock of defeat and eventually exile into Babylon had left them expecting even greater things, not just a restoration to their own land, which happened, but the eventual overthrow of all the powers of the world as the Son of Man that Daniel saw in his vision came to rule.

By the time of Mary, the people had been waiting not just for David to be restored as king but for the son of David, the one whom Isaiah prophesied would bring all nations under the sway of the one God, to sit on the throne and bring even Rome into submission. When would it happen? Who would it be? Where would he come from?

And then one day, the Gospel writer Luke tells us, a young girl living up in the northern limits of Israel receives a message from one of God's messengers. (That's what "angel" means:

"messenger".) She, Mary, or Miriam (one of the many girls in Israel named in hope by their fathers after the sister of Moses) is to be the one through whom the Saviour is to enter the world.

And what does this mean to Mary? What does it mean to those around her? We begin to find out in the Gospel read to us this morning, the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Mary's song that she sings following the encounter. Let's look more carefully.

Mary has gone to visit her cousin Elizabeth, whom earlier in Luke's story was also told that she was to have a child, even though she was infertile. Luke's Gospel in fact starts out not talking about Jesus' birth, but about the birth of this son to Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, a priest who had received a visit from another messenger of God. What Zechariah had been told was that his son was going to be born to prepare the way for the coming Lord.

And now, six months after the announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth, here comes Mary, just pregnant with the coming Lord in her womb, to visit Elizabeth, who has John in her womb. But, before Mary even has a chance to tell Elizabeth the news of what has happened to her, the unborn child in Elizabeth's womb leaps when Elizabeth hears Mary's voice. Elizabeth, the daughter of priests and the wife of a priest, whose own child therefore must be a priest, but who is also going to be a prophet for the Lord, knows what this means. And so Elizabeth cries out to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

These words have come down to us over the centuries since then as the highest acclaim that one can give to a woman, Mary, the mother of our Lord. They have been recited daily and weekly in churches and homes and have become as unforgettable for some as the Lord's Prayer is to us.

But, over the centuries, we have lost sight of what these words meant to Elizabeth and Mary and to the women and the men around them. What we have lost sight of is the expectation that these words carried, the great expectation placed upon the shoulders of John, Elizabeth's child, who would prepare the way, and upon the shoulders of Jesus, the Saviour, the Lord.

We can begin to see what that expectation was when we realize that Elizabeth's words "blessed are you among women" occurs twice in the Jewish Bible and only once in the New Testament. Now, be prepared, since the two times that the expression is used in the Jewish Bible may surprise you. They are probably the last stories you would think of in relation to the Christmas story.

The first time is in the book of Judges. Perhaps you remember the story. The people of Israel, having entered the land of Israel, are now gradually taking possession of it from the Canaanites. One of their kings Jabin, had a very astute general, Sisera, who commanded 900 iron chariots, a huge Weapon of Mass Destruction in those days. The Israelites had no weapon of comparable strength and so for 20 years the Israelites were "pinned down", unable to advance against the land of Jabin. But, under the leadership of the prophetess Deborah, Israel was finally able to defeat the army of Sisera in a great battle, in which all the Canaanites were killed except for

Sisera, who was able to escape, with the hope of rousing other Canaanite armies to fight the Israelites. In his flight from the battle, Sisera stopped to rest among some Israelites with whom he has been on good terms.

Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Come, my Lord, come right in. Don't be afraid." So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him. "I'm thirsty," he said. "Please give me some water." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. "Stand in the doorway of the tent," he told her. "If someone comes by and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.'" But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died. Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple-dead. (Judges 4:17-22)

What do you think about Jael? What kind of woman is she? Treacherous, violating the demands of hospitality. Well, here is what Deborah sings about her to mark the great victory of Israel over the Canaanite armies of Jabin:

"Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women. He asked for water, and she gave him milk; in a bowl fit for nobles she brought him curdled milk. Her hand reached for the tent peg, her right hand for the workman's hammer. She struck Sisera, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell-dead. Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?' The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself, 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, colorful garments as plunder for Sisera, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck – all this as plunder?' So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength." (Judges 5:24-31)

"Blessed among women be Jael". This is the first use in Scripture of the phrase that Elizabeth uses to sing of what Mary, through her child, is going to do. Do you get a clue now of what the "great expectation" is that Elizabeth has for Mary's child?

The second, and only other time this phrase is used, is in a book that the Jews treasured as part of their history, the book of Judith. The book has not come into the Protestant Bible -- because it wasn't written in Hebrew -- but it is found in Catholic Bibles -- which accepted Jewish literature that was only written in Greek. We know that, and other literature like it, was widely read among Jews before and during the time of Jesus. It would have been part of their expectation.

Judith tells once again the story of Israel oppressed, only now it is hundreds of years after the Canaanite wars when Israel is under attack, this time by armies hundreds of times stronger, from the Babylonian Empire. The small Jewish town of Bethulia has refused to respond to the gentile King's request for their rendition, and the King's second in command, Holofernes, has been sent to subdue them. He has devastated the land all around and then laid siege to

Bethuliah. The people in Bethuliah are dying from being cut off from supplies and are ready to surrender to Holofernes unless God acts. (I would like to tell you the whole story, since it is one worthy of a scene from Lord of the Rings, but you should go home this afternoon and read the whole story yourselves.)

Finally, a beautiful widow, Judith, comes to the leader of the town council and berates them for being willing to surrender. They acknowledge her wisdom and tell her to go home now like a good, righteous woman, and pray for them. But she will have none of that. She says to them: "Listen to me. I am about to do a thing which will go down through all generations of our descendants." After a long time in prayer, Judith went and

removed the sackcloth which she had been wearing, and took off her widow`s garments, and bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment, and combed her hair and put on a tiara, and arrayed herself in her gayest apparel, which she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. And she put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets and bracelets and rings, and her earrings and all her ornaments, and made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all men who might see her. (10:3-4)

She leaves the city and makes her way to the enemy camp, where she pretends to have fled the city, which is about to be destroyed by Holofernes, and to have valuable information on the city for Holofernes. Judith is welcomed by Holofernes, who is interested not only in the information that she has brought but also in this beautiful, suddenly available woman. And so, on the night before the attack, Holofernes decides that he had better act now with this Jewish woman Judith before he destroys her city. So, he throws a banquet and invites Judith.

Then Judith came in and lay down, and Holofernes` heart was ravished with her and he was moved with great desire to possess her; for he had been waiting for an opportunity to deceive her, ever since the day he first saw her. So Holofernes said to her. "Drink now, and be merry with us!" Judith said, "I will drink now, my lord, because my life means more to me today than in all the days since I was born." Then she took and ate and drank before him what her maid had prepared. And Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born. When evening came, his slaves quickly withdrew, and Bagoas closed the tent from outside and shut out the attendants from his master`s presence; and they went to bed, for they all were weary because the banquet had lasted long. So Judith was left alone in the tent, with Holofernes stretched out on his bed, for he was overcome with wine. Now Judith had told her maid to stand outside the bedchamber and to wait for her to come out, as she did every day; for she said she would be going out for her prayers. And she had said the same thing to Bagoas. So every one went out, and no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber. Then Judith, standing beside his bed, said in her heart, "O Lord God of all might, look in this hour upon the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. For now is the time to help thy inheritance, and to carry out my undertaking for the destruction of the enemies who have risen up against us." She went up to the post at the end of the bed, above Holofernes` head, and took down his sword that hung there. She came close to his bed and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, "Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel!" And she struck his neck twice with all her might, and severed it from his body. Then she tumbled his body off the bed and pulled down the canopy from the posts; after a moment she went out, and gave Holofernes` head to her maid, who placed it in her food bag. Then the two of them went

out together, as they were accustomed to go for prayer; and they passed through the camp and circled around the valley and went up the mountain to Bethulia and came to its gates. (12:16-20; 13.1-10)

Judith then escapes with her maid, and they rush back to the Israelite city, with Holofernes's head in a bag, where they are greeted by the town council. Israel proceeds to defeat the enemy troops and in recognition of the crucial role of Judith, Ozias, the head of the two council sings:

"O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies. Your hope will never depart from the hearts of men, as they remember the power of God. May God grant this to be a perpetual honor to you, and may he visit you with blessings, because you did not spare your own life when our nation was brought low, but have avenged our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God." And all the people said, "So be it, so be it!" (13.18-20)

"Most blessed are you among women" and all the people cried "Amen, Amen".

This is the second and last time that this refrain is used in Jewish literature, until it is said by Elizabeth of Mary.

These two stories have much in common. Jael and Judith were women who, in the history of Israel acted heroically to cleanse their land of the foreign invader. They did so in ways that overshadowed the accomplishments of men around them. And in a patriarchal culture that must have led to the men's shame: a woman has done what we were not able to do.

Even today in Middle Eastern culture, a woman might be able to do what a man cannot do, and it will be remembered to her glory and to the shame of men, weak men, less than women. In Middle Eastern countries, the women can be just as keen on the violent and thorough cleansing of the land as their men. In fact, they can show them a better way. They are happy to send their sons off to do battle and even to become martyrs, or to go to battle themselves if there is no man who can rid the land of the enemy.

But, what does this have to do with Elizabeth and Mary, you are probably saying? Surely this is not what Elizabeth is saying that Mary or her son was going to do? In fact it is. This was the expectation!

Think about it:

What is it that Jesus' uncle, Zechariah, the father of Jesus' cousin John (who would later be known as "the Baptist"), says at the birth of John the Baptist: this, my son, will go before the one who will liberate us from our enemies and from all those who hate us. We have sat under the yoke of foreign oppression, and occupation of our country for over 500 years, and now God will liberate us.' Did they expect that it would be anything other than thorough and complete, and that it would be violent? Of course not. His wife, Elizabeth, sings at Mary's entrance a war cry

that echoes the violence and mayhem that God was going to bring upon those who had dared to rise up against Him and call themselves Gods. Mary's song, which she sings immediately after Elizabeth, is not the calm, gentle words of lullaby, the words that we think of in the West when we think of "blessed" Mary. They are the fierce words of a mother who is to be the mother of the greatest warrior of all time. This is why she is "blessed"; this is why she will be like Jael and Judith but greater. Mary's song is filled with great expectations for her great child who will bring about God's righteous vengeance, a vengeance that will break forth in the world with almighty power and that will turn the tables on the powerful. For once and for all that righteous anger will cleanse the world of the hated Gentiles.

That was the expectation in Jesus' day. And it appeared when Jesus was born, that first Christmas, whatever season of the year it happened when Jesus was born among shepherds, just as King David had been, and a whole army of angels announced his birth (that's what "host" means: "army"), and when godless Gentile king who ruled over Israel as the puppet of the Romans, Herod, killed all the children under 2 so as to rid himself of this threat to his power, it was then that everyone thought: "yes! this is the moment we have been waiting for, like the birth pangs of a woman in labour, this is going to be difficult, and messy, and even bloody, but it will be worth it in the end, for God alone will rule, and we will rule with him.

That was the expectation but, thanks be to God, that was not God's plan. As Jesus begin to preach, the disappointment that spread over the land was as great as the expectation that had accompanied his birth. For what he began to do was to minister healing and proclaim forgiveness to all those who would have been the first to be taken through the streets and lynched or stoned or hung from bridges and burnt: the adulteress woman, the prostitute, the spy who collaborates with the army of occupation – whom we euphemistically call "tax collector" – the sinner. Israel expected someone who would reap vengeance; what they got was someone who told them to love their enemies, who touched the lives of Roman soldiers, and who never once struck back at someone who hated him, and who in the end died forgiving even those who nailed him to the cross.

Even John the Baptist's expectations of the Messiah were disappointed. John the Baptist, raised by his father Zechariah and his mother Elizabeth in this expectation of world-wide warfare, Jihad, to use the term that we might be familiar with today, anointed Jesus with great expectation only to be disappointed by this king's fulfillment of his role. John, who had gone into the wilderness, as David had done, to prepare an army, John who began to proclaim that the time had finally arrived, and the expectation was to be fulfilled: as Isaiah had written, God was going to shake the foundations of the earth, making the mountains collapse and fall and filling the deep valleys with the rubble, making Israel into a smooth plain. John who had cried out that even now the axe was laid to the root of the tree, and the Messiah was going to appear, first to cleanse Israel of all corruption so as finally to move on to cleanse the world of the hated Gentiles, the chaff whom the wind of God would blow away or burn with unquenchable fire. John who would have sneered at "Joy to the world"? and said, "no, no, set fire to the world and purify it from all evil! Joy to Israel, which will reap the whirlwind of God!"

In expectation, John the Baptist served God faithfully and was imprisoned for his faithful labour of preaching. And so, even John was disappointed in his expectations. And he told Jesus so: he sent to Jesus from prison a message: "How could I have been so wrong in my expectation? Aren't you the one we expected?"

Do you remember what Jesus sent back. A message. But not a message of rebuke but a message of clarification:

"No, John, you were not wrong about me being the one. You were just wrong in what you thought would happen. Look around you, John, all that Isaiah wrote would happen, is happening through me: The blind are seeing; the lame are walking; the lepers are being cleansed; the deaf are hearing. Why, even the dead are being raised to life, and the poor ... for the first time in centuries, the poor are hearing good news.

"Don't you see, John: I am cleansing the world of sin and its effects but I will not do so through destruction. The earth will not be swept clean of evil by the army of Israel riding across the world -- like Sherman across the South --, slaying the wicked as we go. It will happen among the people of Israel throughout my life; but when I die and take all evil with me to the grave, I will return from the grave and bring life to the whole world. Death will hang around but only as a vestige of what once was, the last gasp of an age that has died, but it will not be in control any more."

But don't be too hard on them. John and his parents, Zechariah and Elisabeth, were creatures of their time; they thought they had the right expectation, but they could never have imagined what God was going to do. Even Mary: she had great expectations for her son, and she was absolutely right to have them, but even she could not have imagined what her son was going to do. At least she was willing to learn, and that is what makes her great.

Let me conclude.

What are your expectations of God? Are they big enough, wide enough, creative enough... to let God do what God plans to do anyway?

Are you willing to learn, as Mary had to do, how to adjust your expectations in order to let God's work proceed? Are you willing to adjust your driving pattern to keep your expectation alive and alert as you follow through the Lord through confusing and difficult times?

As you go through life, are you aware that where life happens, God is there, and where death happens, sin continues its icy and wintry grip on Narnia. Bad things may have happened to you, to those around you, even horrible things. But, are you willing to let God to bring good out of the grave, and thus to thaw the ice of winter? Or will you cling to a desire for vengeance?

God loves this world. So much so that, in the midst of so many expectations centuries ago, he sent His son to enter into it and to die, giving His life as a ransom for many in order to stop the cycle of vengeance and the cycle of death. Yes, it's true death continues, at least for a little while longer until the battle is complete. But even now it is only something that affects our bodies; it has no more power, as it once did, to destroy our souls, our relationship with God.

Everyone expected death that first Christmas. No one could have expected that it would be the death of death itself that would begin that first Christmas. Thanks be to God!