

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Psalm 96

Certainly the Jewish people had great expectations about what would happen when their long-awaited Messiah appeared. He would come with great power and force. There would be no question about who he was or what his arrival on earth would mean for them. Long held in oppression and bondage by the Roman Empire, the people of Judea had longed for centuries to be rescued and relieved of their burdens. They were God's chosen people and they had great faith that God would prevail. Their captivity to Rome could not last forever, and yet, it had gone on for hundreds of years with no relief in sight.

And Mary had had a vision...a visit from the angel Gabriel...that she was to give birth to this long-expected Messiah. No one would have guessed that the Messiah would enter the world not as a powerful warrior, but as a helpless infant. And Mary's expectations about the arrival of her first child must have been quite different that what actually occurred.

God's timing is always perfect. God placed the arrival of Jesus in the town of Bethlehem, also known as the City of David. How could Mary have known when she learned she was expecting that the forces of Rome would take her away from her home and all that was familiar to her. She must have imagined that when her baby arrived, she would be in her home in Nazareth surrounded by a midwife and her mother and the other females in her family. That would be a normal expectation.

And yet, that's not what happened. Secular events of the day intervened with a completely different plan than the one Mary must have had in mind. At the end of her pregnancy, not at the beginning or even in the middle, she found herself on a donkey travelling some 90 miles to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Imagine, if you can, that you are at the end of a pregnancy and find yourself riding a donkey through rough terrain that is basically the distance between here and Charlottesville. It would be, perhaps, not what you expected just before giving birth.

And she and Joseph were not the only ones travelling to that little town. They arrived to find themselves in throngs of people all looking for a place to stay and something to eat. The little

town was overwhelmed by the influx of hundreds of people. Mary and Joseph were perhaps overwhelmed as well. Imagine the desperation of a young pregnant woman and her betrothed, Joseph, having already found themselves surrounded by scandal in their hometown, now having to worry about physical survival in an overcrowded and ill-prepared city foreign to them. It's easy to imagine their anxiety. How far would their faith in God and in the power of the encounter with the angel Gabriel and the dreams of Joseph take them? This scenario can't be what they had expected!

Our expectations and God's plans do not always coincide. As a matter of fact, they usually don't. When we say "yes" to God as Mary and Joseph surely did, we may think we know what will happen, but we are almost always surprised as events unfold.

The beleaguered Mary and Joseph did find shelter in a place that also sheltered animals. This can't be what they had expected. And in these circumstances and all alone these two brought the savior of the world into the world. There were no helpers...no doctors or midwives or female relatives...just Mary and Joseph surrounded by the livestock.

This is not the entrance of the Messiah that any Jew would have expected. And yet, those were the circumstances of Jesus' birth. And the heralds...the ones who spread the word about the birth of the Savior...were not the ones the Jews expected to be the heralds. The ones who were the first to learn of the Messiah's birth were a band of grimy, ragtag shepherds out in the fields with their sheep. Angels appeared to them which had to have been more than just startling. None of them could have expected that they would be the first ones to learn of the arrival of the Messiah...and that they would hear the news from an angel! The angel arrives with the power and majesty of the Almighty. The sight startles mere human beings who are awed by the angel's presence whose first words are, "Do not be afraid." A sleepy shepherd on a quiet hillside outside town attending his sheep must have been terrified by the sight an angel. And even more disturbed by the appearance of a host angels praising God. This interruption into their night could not possibly have been what they had expected and so powerful that it could not be dismissed! They took off without thinking twice to go find the baby the angels had described to them. Given the description they heard, that baby wouldn't be hard to find.

These series of events are so far outside the normal expectations that human beings have that they simultaneously seem unbelievable and yet so unique that they could only be associated with God. The shepherds are told to look for an infant that has been bound in rags and placed in an animal feed trough...a manger. There couldn't be many brand new babies at that moment who had that same description. What parents in their right minds would wrap their newborn in rags and place him in a feed trough?

But all of those circumstances had meaning when seen through the lens of God's plan. The great King David was also a shepherd. He became the shepherd king of the Jews. And Jesus himself would come to be known as the Good Shepherd of God's people.

As an infant, Jesus was placed on a bed of hay...food for the animals. And Jesus himself would become food for the entire world before all was said and done.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth tell us about God...about God's desire to be among the fringes of society. About God's willingness to enter the world as helpless rather than powerful. About God's miraculous way of weaving His will through the secular events in any time and place.

Each year as we pause to remember this event, we are not just celebrating the birthday of Jesus. We are marking not just an event in history at a particular time and in a particular place, but the active remembering of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ and the promise of the coming completion of God's reign. It is not only Christ's birth that we celebrate, but it is the birth of the new creation that we look forward to coming to fruition in God's time.

We are part of that kingdom of new creation. We have been claimed by God as God's own. We know the promise that began with Jesus' birth. And we have great expectations of what is to come.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.