

**You Never Really Know**  
1 Samuel 2:18–20; 26  
Luke 2:41–52  
Wake Forest Baptist Church  
Rev. Susan Parker  
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Another Christmas has come and gone. A new year is just around the corner. Was Christmas everything you thought it would be? Hoped it would be? Expectations are funny things as they can help you prepare well for upcoming events, anticipating what might arise and how you might respond to it. But expectations can also be set too high – or too low – exposing us to surprises that can range from painful to pleasant.

Our texts this morning have moved us by years into the early lives of both Samuel and Jesus, yet in the texts, it has only been a few short verses between annunciation and the childhood stories of these two boys. Both Hannah and Mary knew, even before the birth, that something special was going to happen with these children, but could they have ever really expected what was to come?

Here's another story of surprising expectations.

A young mother of the American south sits at her sewing machine, repairing the clothes of her 9 and 10 year-old sons. It is March. The sun streaming in the window in front of her is warm on her hands and face as she works, though she knows if she places her hand to the pane that the glass will be quite cold to the touch. She shivers. Spring is fast approaching and she is eager for its return so that she can begin planning her garden. As she works, she finds herself offering up the same prayer she has for many years: "God, please bring a daughter to me. I have served you faithfully, I've raised my sons well, but God, please bring me a daughter". The prayer has become almost second nature, a mantra, an unconscious offering into the cosmos.

But today, today something very different begins to happen. There's, there's a presence here...what's happening? God? Oh God, is it really you? And a conversation ensues between the woman and God. Mere words can't describe the moment. It's as though Spirit and soul are intertwined, passing emotions, thoughts, questions, and promises back and forth instantaneously.

Of the content of the encounter there are descriptive words: God and the woman spoke. The woman is pregnant. The child will be a girl. Euphoria washes over the woman. Her prayers have been answered. God has blessed her. And in her thanksgiving, she has promised God to train this child well, for she knows the child will one day be returned to God's service.

The light in the room had seemed a bit too bright, but was now returning to normal, as was her heart rate. Did what she think just happened really happen? The mother puts aside her work and calls her doctor's office. She makes an appointment to

get a pregnancy test, but she knows it is unnecessary. In that way women know, she was already aware of the child to be, the daughter to be, within her.

Over the intervening months, she works to prepare the home for this new arrival. But in her heart, she carries the secret of that special afternoon in March. She shares it with no one, believing they will think her mad if she tells them about it. She carries on her work in silence, holding quietly in her heart the truth about the coming child. After what seems more like nine years than nine months, the long-awaited day finally arrives. The daughter is delivered.

The years begin to speed by. The mother, fulfilling her promise to God, takes the child to church with her at every opportunity. The daughter absorbs the children's lessons, always eager to know more. Her teachers report to the mother that they can't seem to ever satisfy all of the young girl's questions; she just wants to know more about God. At home, the mother and daughter talk about what has been learned, and the mother marvels at how quickly a young mind absorbs details.

In eight years that speed by like eight weeks, the mother looks on as the daughter walks to the front of the church to give her life to Jesus. The mother worries that the daughter is too young to make such a decision, but the preacher has talked with the girl and is convinced that the experience is real. The baptism takes place the following Sunday. The mother, watching, thinks, "My daughter doesn't even know how to swim. She's so little. I hope the preacher holds her real tight."

Eight more years speed by, but these years have been difficult ones for both the mother and the now young woman. When did it start, the mother asks herself, when did I lose her? I must have done something wrong because she never talks to me anymore. I can't get her to go to church with me. The fire in her, the life I used to see in her eyes; it's just not there anymore. What could have happened? The mother has prayed fervently for guidance, but God just doesn't seem to be taking prayers from her anymore. By the end of the year, the young woman has moved out of the house and the break between mother and daughter is complete.

Now the years pass more slowly, painfully so, the agony of self-doubt eating at the mother like a cancer as the years slip by. Conversations with the daughter are few and far between as are her visits home. The mother asks her daughter where she's going to church. She needn't bother. She knows the answer her daughter will give her is a lie. Through the eyes of a mother, she sees that there is a hardness in the daughter where once there was only soft laughter and joy. But the mother never quits praying, "God, if I did something wrong, I ask your forgiveness. Please take care of her God; please hold her real tight."

It is summer. The mother's flowers are in full bloom. Flowers are now her passion. They offer her the beauty she longs for in life, giving her a sense of accomplishment, and enlivening the quiet house. Her daughter will be arriving soon. She is afraid to get too excited about the visit. The visits have been increasing in frequency, and while the conversations have been difficult, at least there are conversations again!

And it was exciting to ask the daughter about church and know that, yes, she was really going to a church again! God is good! The mother looks up from her flowers to see the daughter entering the driveway. They exchange greetings.

The conversation begins as they enter the kitchen.

“Mother,” the daughter said, “I’ve been thinking about something and wanted to tell you about it.”

“What is it?” the mother asked, her pulse quickening, her mother’s instinct telling her that something very important was about to happen.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about going back to school.” said the daughter.

“Oh really, that sounds nice. What are you going to study?”

“Well, I think I’ll be going to divinity school...you see, I feel I’m being called to ministry...”

The daughter’s words fall on increasingly deaf ears as the mother sits down quickly, her knees weak and her head pounding from what she’s hearing, tears welling up in her eyes as the tensions of so many years of hoping and praying drain from her body. “Thank you, God.” she said heavenward as she stands to hug her daughter, knowing she could now share with her daughter the story of that long-ago March afternoon.

I imagine by now some of you have guessed that this story is about my mother and me. But our story doesn’t end there.

To say that I was shocked by my mother’s story of that March afternoon in 1958 would be a gross understatement. I’m a 21<sup>st</sup> century woman. I had read annunciation stories in the Bible and I loved their beauty, but I couldn’t transport them to the present. It’s one thing for me to share my sense of call, quite another to imagine my mother having a chat with God - about me - as the cells that would one day be me began to divide and differentiate.

Mother was beside herself with happiness, calling all the relatives to tell them my news, calling me to tell me how happy she was, and how happy my uncle, cousin, brother, mailman, etc. etc. were. But as I watched her in her happiness, I realized that I should have made her listen to one more thing before I let her go. I should have made her finally understand that I was a lesbian. Now many of you look at me and say, “What do you mean she didn’t know?” But denial is many parents’ best friend, and she was neck-deep in it.

There’s another story to be told about the day when I went back for ‘that talk’ with her, but this is not that day. The story of today is that of surprise at how our expectations often cannot prepare us for what will come, particularly not where God is involved. People had thought Hannah mad, or drunk, or both, as she prayed to God for the child she promised would be returned to God. Mary, upon hearing the promise of her

upcoming child, went and stayed with her relative Elizabeth for three months, probably reasoning that Elizabeth – who had been in seclusion for five months, herself – would be the only other woman who could understand the perplexing information about her pregnancy. My mother had told no one her story. I'm sure other mothers have experienced situations during pregnancies that they did not feel they could share with anyone, either.

Children are imprinted with so many hopes and dreams, perhaps more in our contemporary era than in bygone days when so many children failed to survive infancy. Still, even knowing the odds, ancient mothers would have been filled with possibilities for their children, some shared aloud, and some carried in the heart.

A wonderful trait of most human parents, at least, is the desire for their offspring to have better lives than they did. Whether or not we, as those offspring, ever believe we live up to parental expectations is quite another kettle of fish, and the reason pastors, counselors and psychiatrists have plenty of work. My mother has never quite come to grips with how her expectations of giving me back to God have been played out in reality. On the one hand, she still believes what happened on that March day in 1958, but on the other hand, she still cannot figure out how to reconcile God's promise with the reality of my life.

There's a quick line in verse 51 of the Lukan text today that may offer a clue to the inexplicable nature of our expectations of our children, our future. Upon finally finding Jesus back in the temple, carrying on an adult conversation with the rabbis, his mother says to him: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been looking for you in great anxiety." Jesus' reply was very matter-of-fact, and might have sounded harsh to his parents as he basically says to them, "Where else would I be except here?" But then, they return to Nazareth and we are told that Jesus obeyed them, to which Mary is said to have kept all these things in her heart.

Mary, the one to whom the angel appeared, the one to whom promises were made, the one entrusted to raise this special child, was, like any parent, continuing to try and sort out what was happening. She was not provided with any special knowledge of how to raise this child, and clearly he surprised her in this instance as he no doubt did in others. The best she could do was to continue to reflect on and think about what was happening, as it happened, because she could not do otherwise.

Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said that the best thing about the future is that it only comes one day at a time. One day at a time is a mantra followed by many, from those struggling with addictions to those struggling with decisions – or expectations. Living one day at a time enables us to continue to adjust our thoughts and actions to new information. It does not necessarily obliterate our hoped-for expectations, but at best it does temper them as we learn more about another person or situation and can react to that material. Still, we will never really know exactly what's going to happen; that's the realm of faith.

Episcopal laywoman and educator Verna Dozier, writing in her book, *The Dream of God*, says: “Doubt is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today.” (p. 47) Moving steadily ahead in faith, taking things a day at a time, gives us the opportunity to assimilate “more and different things” than we know today, opening us to new possibilities we cannot yet imagine.

Those are hard words for parents as they think about the lives ahead of their children, but they are also hard words for institutions like ours, as we ponder the days ahead of our church. In our lives apart, and in our lives together in this community, there will always be the temptation to jump ahead, making assumptions about what we should expect to happen, rather than continuing a deliberate journey of faith that allows us time to take in new possibilities.

We are days away from a new year, a fresh opportunity to make decisions about how we will proceed. May God help us to be faithful rather than fearful as we continue our journey together. Amen.