

Sermon Transcript

Luke 1:5-25 | November 26, 2023 | First Sunday of Advent | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my brothers and sisters in Christ,

On Tuesday during Bible Study, I asked the groups a few questions as our ice-breaker:

When have you received unexpected news? How did you respond at first? Did your response change as reality sunk in?

This was one of the most talkative opening questions I've heard. Many people chimed in. And almost every single example was about devastating news.

A terminal diagnosis of a loved one

9/11

JFK's assassination.

Even the author of the book **"An Unlikely Advent"**(BOOK) who wrote about the unexpected news that Elizabeth and Zechariah received began their chapter by relating to an unfortunate medical diagnosis of her daughter.

I remember the day that we brought our 5 month old son, Oliver, to Saint Cloud for an MRI expecting to hear that he had a tumor on his optic nerve.

What we learned was not that.

Instead, he was missing part of his brain. He would be severely disabled (**SLIDE of Oli/Adina**).

First response? Truthfully? Confusion. Denial. Anger. All of those feelings. You can't help but grapple with the "why".

Eventually, the "why" questions faded for me and reality sunk in.

Those first few years—with constant trips to the doctor, Oliver almost dying on Good Friday, and then a prolonged stay on hospice before he eventually found a place of stability (**SLIDE of Oli today**)—those years were hard.

The hardest part was the change in expectations. Soon after the diagnosis, Taryn found a reading by Emily Perl Kingsley.

*When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. **The Coliseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. (pics of ITALY)** You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.*

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The flight attendant comes on and says, "Welcome to Holland."

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“Holland?!?” you say. “What do you mean Holland?? I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.”

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place.

So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met.

*It's just a different place. It's less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around.... and you begin to notice that **Holland has windmills....and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.***

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say “Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned.”

And the pain of that will never go away... because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss.

But... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland.

Have you ever had expectations and then, suddenly, everything changed? Have you anticipated one path only to find that life would be going in a different direction?

It's fun to tease about our resistance to “change”—especially in the church. It's not that we are resistant to change, it's more so that we don't like losing control or the ability to anticipate what's next. Maybe we are confronted with so much change in our lives that we want church to be that one steady, constant, place of stability.

It's interesting that we feel this way while reading stories week after week about people who do exactly that—face changes that they weren't anticipating and then putting their trust in God.

You might think that Zechariah and Elizabeth, or even Mary and Joseph for that matter, are the only times that people are surprised at an unplanned pregnancy.

On the contrary, this theme is found over and over again in the Hebrew Bible—stories of birth when it appeared all was barren.

The birth of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Samson, Samuel, and the Shunammite woman (each story) all have similar stories of conception.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had the loss of a dream. We can forgive Zechariah for being skeptical when the angel informs him that his prayer is being answered.

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Zechariah had prayed for a child for years. Now, at their advanced age, finally that prayer is answered.

They'd likely moved on. They'd likely given up that dream. Zechariah asks "How can I know this will happen?" and the angel says that since he didn't believe, he'll be mute until the child is born.

Elizabeth, conversely, never gave up hope.

In Jewish society, Honor and Shame is a significant theme. Because her role in society was defined by providing children, Elizabeth felt ashamed that she hadn't provided.

They didn't know about infertility. They didn't live in a time like ours. They needed to have kids in order for the people to survive—for the line to continue.

Learning this news about the birth of John was definitely good news to Elizabeth—as Luke wrote, this took away the disgrace she felt among her people.

Yet, this child would be different. Set aside—taking a Nazirite vow, which meant no drinking, no cutting his hair. Remember the story of Samson and Delilah? John would follow similar expectations.

John was uniquely qualified to prepare the way. Out of the unexpected, John is born to lead to someone even bigger.

John's arrival is preparing the way for an even bigger dream to become reality.

Jesus.

Jesus is coming.

In fact, he was so unexpected that his arrival was unbelievable. There were plenty of skeptics.

Many of his closest followers thought they were on a trip to Italy with him--that he was the great promised Messiah.

Imagine their disappointment when Jesus didn't ride in a war horse, but a humble donkey.

Imagine the shattered dreams when he isn't preparing his people to overthrow the Empire with swords but preached of God's Kingdom reigning through love and mercy—of loving thy neighbor.

We wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, but Jesus is already here.

We don't have to wait. We don't ignore the needs of others while we long for the coming of our Savior. We don't withhold forgiveness and mercy until Jesus can teach us how to do it.

Jesus is here. Having Jesus in our lives, in our hearts, and in our voice changes everything.

Whether we end up in Italy, Holland, or Forest Lake, MN... Jesus is on the journey with us.



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The most important part of the journey I've taken with Oliver is that in the hardest moments and in the biggest decisions that we've faced, I can look back and see where God was with us—guiding us, encouraging us, and being present.

Expect the unexpected. And know that God is with us each step of the way. Amen.