

Unexpectedly Expecting

Luke Series #4

Luke 1:39-56

David Sunday

December 9, 2012

As we turn to the Word of the Living God, let's turn our hearts to Him.

Lord, open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Your Word. Open the eyes and hearts of all who gather this time of year for Christmas concerts here and worldwide. As a result of the ministry of Your people through the power of Your Spirit, we pray that many would come to know with certainty that Jesus is the Christ Who came to seek and save the lost. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 1:39-56:

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

*⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

*⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

*⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;*

*⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;*

*⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,*

⁵⁵ *as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.*

This is the Word of the Living God and we thank Him for it.

It's a dangerous journey for Mary—this young, unwed, expectant mother—to go from her home into the hill country where her elderly cousin Elizabeth resides. She has to span a distance of about 80-100 miles, through rugged terrain—a perilous excursion for any young teenager.

I wonder: Did she tell her parents what she was doing? Did she travel alone?

Mike and I traveled near this area while we were in Jordan last year and I can tell you for sure I wouldn't want my daughter Ruth making this journey all by herself! It's quite a perilous excursion. But Mary is breathless with anticipation, bursting with news that she longs to share with someone and she cannot share it with just anyone—not yet.

When the angel Gabriel announced to her that she was going to conceive in her womb and bear a Son through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit, he gave her a hint of who would be ready for an early announcement of this suspicious pregnancy. In verse 36, the angel said to Mary, *“And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

So when the angel departed from her, Mary wasted no time in getting ready for this wilderness road trip. We're told in verse 39, *“Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house and greeted Elizabeth.”* Biblical scholars call this “The Visitation.” Can you imagine the excitement of these two women when they finally see each other face-to-face?

Think about it: Zechariah—the only man in the house—cannot speak or hear anything. He is out of commission—so they've got all the “girl time” they could possibly desire! I was tempted to title this message What to Expect When You're Expecting, the name of a popular book that most expectant parents in the past twenty years have consulted. But that title wouldn't work with this narrative because here we have a story of two women who are *unexpectedly expecting*. And the more we look at the story, the more we are surprised by things we do not expect to see or hear. These pregnancies defy expectations.

Of these two women, the commentator R.T. France said, “One is old and has no children; the other is young and has no husband. But both are pregnant—and both are ready to announce the Good News to the world.” Now here they meet, face-to-face, the only two women on the planet who are capable of understanding and entering into each other's joy and wonderment.

As I've been savoring these Scriptures this week, an Old Testament phrase kept simmering in the back of my mind: “*awesome things we did not expect.*” I kept asking, “Where have I read that phrase?” Then I found it in Isaiah 64:3-4. These words are a stunning backdrop to this narrative:

*When you did awesome things that we did not look for [or some translations state 'took us by surprise' or 'beyond our highest expectations'],
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.*

I thought, “That’s a perfect commentary on what’s happening here in Luke 1.” God is coming down into our world and we have a story bursting with awesome things we don't expect, deeds beyond our highest expectations, things that take us by surprise. I wonder if God has done anything unexpected in your life? When God saved you through Jesus, was that unexpected? Did that take you by surprise? Does God’s intervention of grace into your world—into your sin and misery—still amaze you? Is that an awesome thing that defies your wildest expectations?

I want to highlight three unexpected threads in this story that strike me as surprising and awesome. Three things that arrest our attention because they are not what we expect to see. They catch us off guard. Then I hope to tie it together with one unifying motif that I think penetratingly speaks into our hearts today.

An Unborn Baby Leaps for Joy

Wow! Did you catch that in the narrative? That’s surprising. Look at verse 41 again: “*And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.*” And again, in verse 44, Elizabeth describes what happened: “*For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*”

Now no man should claim to be an expert on babies leaping in the womb. This is something that only a woman could describe. But if we take the text of Scripture seriously, we have to conclude that this is more than the typical movements and kicks that a woman who is six-months along in her pregnancy will feel. This is a prophetic pole vault! This was a Spirit-inspired proclamation by a pre-born preacher, announcing the arrival of the Messiah. It's amazing how we get our pro-life theology from this Scripture. It's narratives like this that describe the dignity, humanity and the work of God in the unborn child in the womb. It's mind boggling to consider the value God places on pre-born life! Striking, isn't it?

Phil Ryken writes, "John the Baptist was the only child ever to use the womb as a pulpit." And one of the early church fathers said, "Not yet born, already John prophesies. And while still in the enclosure of his mother's womb, confesses the coming of Christ with movements of joy."

So what we see is that this is not just a visitation between two pregnant women—it is also the first visitation between their pre-born sons, both of whom are unique sons of promise, both of whom are key figures in the redemptive plans and purposes of God. Before Mary has a chance to say anything to Elizabeth about her miraculous pregnancy, the baby in Elizabeth's womb beats her to it! He gets the first word through his prophetic leap.

John the Baptist, we were told in verse 15, would be *"filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."* And under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he signifies his joy at the revelation of God's Messiah into this world. The angel Gabriel told Mary, "You will conceive in your womb." But the unborn baby John is now announcing, "Mary, you are pregnant! The Messiah has come!"

This is the first indication we have in the Scriptures that this miraculous conception has actually taken place. This is both theologically significant and devotionally instructive for us when we consider this unborn baby leaping.

First, the theological significance. Think about it. Here we find the last and greatest prophet of the Old Covenant—John the Baptist—meeting the Lord and Savior of the New Covenant—Jesus Christ—for the first time. Here the Old Covenant and the New Covenant meet. We're standing at the hinge of redemptive history; at the breaking of the dawn of salvation.

John's fetal leap for joy is prompted by the recognition that here at long last, the moment of destiny that had been planned from before the foundation of the world has arrived. The long-expected Savior has come, the One Whom God had in mind from the Garden of Eden—the seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15)—is here. The promised Son of Abraham, in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed, has entered the stage of redemption's climactic act. The Deliverer of God's wayward, backsliding, oppressed people is in the room, to release us from all our fears and sins!

Yes, John the Baptist, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recognizes that the moment on which God had steadily fixed His eyes from the beginning of creation has now come. The point to which all the tides and currents of history were rushing has finally arrived so he leaps for joy inside his mother's womb as a way of saying, "Welcome to our world, our great Redeemer!"

That's the theological significance of this unborn baby leaping but this is also **devotionally instructive** for each of us. We learn from this leaping baby that the coming of Jesus into our lives fills us with inexpressible joy. Whenever Jesus appears in our lives, the result is joy.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing...

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

Throughout John's life, the closer he gets to Jesus and the more he sees the significance of Jesus' work, the greater his joy becomes. Listen to this testimony of John the Baptist about 30 years later, toward the end of his life, in John 3:28-30:

"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

That's the story of John's life. His joy constantly and consistently makes much of Jesus Christ. He takes joy in decreasing so Christ can increase—from the womb to the grave. Joy comes from making much of Jesus which is always the fruit of the fullness of the

Holy Spirit in our lives. The more the Holy Spirit fills and controls us, the more we long to magnify Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives to shine the spotlight on Jesus.

Recently, I heard of a seminary professor who has all his students stand up in class and say these words aloud, "I am not the Christ!" That's a good reminder. It is not my job to save the world. It is not my responsibility to bear the weight of the world on my shoulders and it is not my right nor is it my prerogative to receive glory from the world. I am not the Christ. My joy consists in making much of Him and thrusting Him forward. That would not be a bad exercise for all of us to do from time-to-time, to stand in front of the mirror and say, "David, I am not the Christ. My job is to make much of Him."

This is surprising to me as I see the role of John the Baptist leaping in his womb, glorifying Jesus Christ before he is even born.

An Older Woman's Remarkable Humility

Now let's turn our attention to Elizabeth. As I look at this woman's character, her humility is striking to me. She is an older woman, with years of spiritual experience and depth of maturity. We heard Luke's testimony about her maturity and character back in verse six. *"And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."* She and her husband were both pillars in the community.

Now she is experiencing a miracle for which she had waited her entire married life. By the grace and mercy of God, she is pregnant! But look at what happens when her young, unmarried, pregnant cousin arrives on the scene. What does Elizabeth do? She lets her own joy in the good news of her pregnancy be overshadowed and eclipsed by the greater joy of Mary's pregnancy.

Notice as we read the narrative between them that Elizabeth spends no time focusing on herself. She directs all her attention on blessing Mary and especially on the Baby in Mary's womb. We read in verse 41 that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit herself. She becomes a prophetess and starts pronouncing blessings:

- upon Mary in verse 42: *“Blessed are you among women...”*
- upon the baby in Mary’s womb, *“...and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”*
- and then in verse 45, a blessing upon Mary *“who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”*

So Elizabeth focuses on being a blessing to Mary. Then the most remarkable thing about what Elizabeth says is not about Mary but what she says about Mary’s Baby. Look at verse 43, *“And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* Here Jesus is just a newly conceived zygote in the womb of His mother—invisible to the human eye. But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this older, godly woman recognizes Him as her Lord. She echoes the prophecy of Psalm 110 where David said, *“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for my feet...’”* Elizabeth becomes the first person to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. She worships Him. She acknowledges Him. This is a striking testimony of the truth of 1 Corinthians 12:3, *“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”* And that’s what Elizabeth does through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth, as the elder of the two, is the one Mary should be honoring but instead Elizabeth is overwhelmed at the honor of Mary's visit. Look at verse 43 again: *“And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”*

Elizabeth’s humility is instructive to us in two different ways.

First, Elizabeth shows us how we are to esteem those who have been endowed by God more generously than ourselves. She shows us how to avoid two pitfalls: jealousy—she doesn’t despise the gifts of God in Mary. In the words of John Calvin, “We are not to spurn them, for that would be an ungrateful and wicked act, designed to snuff out God’s glory in the very place where it shines most brightly. At the same time, however, we must always recognize that the gifted are frail mortals and that the good in them is to be attributed to God alone.”

Elizabeth avoids falling into the trap of jealousy that many of us fall into when we see someone who is more gifted than we are. We get jealous. We withdraw. We don’t want to praise and affirm and bless because we’re jealous. But on the other hand, Elizabeth doesn't arrogantly refuse to welcome Mary or disdain honoring Mary more highly than herself but declares her most uniquely *“blessed among women.”*

She also avoids falling into a trap many have fallen into and that's the trap of "Mariolatry." She blesses Mary for her faith and for the honor God has bestowed on her as the bearer of God's Son; but she doesn't worship Mary. Elizabeth is more concerned with the Child that is in Mary's womb. He is the One Who is the Lord—the object of her worship.

Because of her humility, Elizabeth is uniquely positioned to be a blessing and an encouragement to Mary, confirming her and spurring her on in her faith for the next three crucial months in her young life and her pregnancy. Verse 56 says that Mary stayed there with Elizabeth about three months and that God was using Elizabeth to strengthen Mary in her faith, just like God intends to you who are older women in the church today. When you are humble like Elizabeth, you too will be poised to strengthen the faith of those who are younger (Titus 2).

So that's our first lesson—how to esteem those who have been more generously gifted by God than we have.

Secondly, we can learn from Elizabeth as she gives us a beautiful example of the importance of putting Jesus first. When you talk to a pregnant mother, who do you think is the most important baby in the world to that mother? It's probably the one she's carrying in her womb at that moment. Instead of doing what parents typically do—bragging about their own kids—she gladly acknowledges that Mary's Son will be more prominent than her own. No wonder her son would later say, "He must increase; I must decrease." I believe John the Baptist learned that from his mother. Her humility is instructive to us—she puts Jesus first.

Then there's one more thread from this narrative that I want us to consider. One more surprising, unexpected, striking element of this story.

A Teenage Girl's Prophetic Boldness

We find this in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) which is a passage we'll come back to again and again in our Christian lives because it's so rich. For now, I just want to focus on one aspect of this Magnificat—the boldness of the message Mary proclaims is most striking.

Listen carefully to Mary. You might be surprised at what you hear. It's a part of the Christmas message we don't as commonly hear when "the old familiar carols" play. It's a part we don't emphasize so much but listen to verses 51-55. Listen to the great expectations Mary has concerning the impact of her Son on the world. It's earth-shattering.

It's revolutionary when you really hear what she expects the effect of her Son to be on the world. Imagine Mary saying this with this unborn Baby in her womb:

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

So what is Mary doing here? She's looking back at the ways of God in history, reaching their fulfillment in the ministry of her Son, the Messiah. Think of stories like Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel—how God is able to humble those who walk in pride. Mary is looking back at the ways of God in history and saying, "Those ways have reached their fulfillment now in the Messiah—the Son in my womb." She's so confident of the outcome of His life and ministry that she can speak of God's actions in Him as if they've already been accomplished. She switches from present to past tense in verse 41, like a prophet often does when he speaks of things yet in the future as if they've already happened. She's so confident of the outcome of her Son's life and ministry that it's like she's looking through a telescopic lens, seeing sees the far-reaching effects of His rule over the world. She's rejoicing in the fact that God is going to do awesome things we do not expect through the reign of her Son, the Messiah. And the effect of His reign and these awesome events will be devastating to some, even as they will be exhilarating to others.

What's surprising about Mary's Magnificat is that she makes it clear that the coming of Christ into the world is bad news for some people. It's bad news for...

- Those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts
- Those who are pompous in their high and mighty positions
- Those who are drunk on their own power
- Those who are rich and self-sufficient in their own eyes and think they can buy their salvation themselves.

The coming of Jesus is bad news. Listen to how Mary witnesses so boldly in this Magnificat. She is shouting for all who have ears to hear:

- “Your standing in this world is meaningless to God—He doesn’t care how high your throne is in this world. He can bring you down from your high position.”
- She’s shouting for all who have ears to hear, “Your pride in yourself is despicable to God. He will scatter you if you don’t humble yourself. He will make you like Nebuchadnezzar whose mind was scattered. Everything he had stood for and lived for was scattered.”
- She’s declaring, “The strength that you are so boastful of is puny in the eyes of God.”
- And “Your wealth that you have made your treasure is laughable and ephemeral. It’s going to be carried away by a bird someday.”
- Mary is saying, “God doesn’t care about what this world values. That means nothing to Him. He turns the values of this world upside down.”

If you think, “I am rich, prosperous and in need of nothing from God, I can live independently from Him” and do not realize that you are wretched, poor, pitiable, blind and naked in the sight of God, one day God will confront you with the awesome glory of Jesus Christ the Messiah, and you will be terrified by His power. He has power to scatter you. He has power to bring you down from your throne. He has power to strip you of all the riches you have trusted in and treasured. This will be true of nations and political leaders. And it will be true of individuals.

This is a bold message but it’s an important part of the Christmas message. Who knows better who to speak about what Christmas is all about than Jesus’ mother? She’s telling us, “It’s bad news if you’re holding on to your own pride because my Son will bring you down. He will humble you.”

But Christ’s coming is good news...

- If you fear the Lord—stand in awe and tremble and fall on your knees before Him— you will find His mercy from generation to generation; it will never end (Luke 1:50).
- If you humble yourself before the Lord and confess that He alone is great. Look what He will do for you in verse 52—He will exalt you! He will lift you up!
- If you hunger and thirst for the riches of God’s presence and God’s pleasure, look at what He will do for you in verse 53—He will fill you with good things! He will satisfy you.
- If you trust in His promises—promises that go way back to Abraham all through the Old Testament—what will He do? Verses 54-55 tell us He will help you in remembrance of His mercy. That’s what the coming of Jesus signifies—that God is faithful to the humble, the weak and the weary. That God is faithful to those

who trust in Him and that God will do surprising, amazing things that turn the values of this world upside down.

You see, the coming of Jesus into the lives of John, Elizabeth and Mary was anything but stale, dry and predictable! Likewise, His coming into our lives and the anticipation of His coming again should keep us on our tiptoes, breathless with anticipation, eager to see what He will do next—like little children waiting for Christmas. What will it be like when He comes again into our world and when everything His mother has spoken of Him will reach its grand finale? Won't that be glorious? It's a bold message that we hear from this virgin Mary. Awesome things that we do not expect are yet to take place in this world when He comes back as our glorious King!

A Unifying Motif That Ties These Threads Together

So how can we tie all these threads together? Thursday night, while I was in my study at home, I was praying about this message, asking God to show me how all this fits together—this glorious story with so many exciting and surprising turns. “Lord, show me how this speaks to the heart of our church. What is the main point to bring to Your people of New Covenant Bible Church?”

I looked up and saw a piece of paper on the cork board that I pinned up there nearly two years ago. It was an article from January 2011. I loved the title so I pinned it up on my wall and here's the title:

“The Great Bigness of Considering Yourself Inconsequentially Small”

I was gripped by that title and the article went on to quote the sixth-century church leader—Gregory the Great—who said:

“When you are small to yourself, you are great to the Lord; but when you think of yourself as great, you become small to the Lord.”

When I read that article, I thought, “I want to look at that message regularly throughout my life.” When you are small to yourself, you become great to the Lord but when you are great to yourself you become small in the eyes of the Lord. As I saw that title Thursday night, I realized that's the thread that ties these stories together because what's so striking about all these godly examples is that they were all small in their own eyes.

If you were to write a biography of John the Baptist, this would be the perfect title: “Jesus must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30). John got smaller and smaller and smaller the bigger Jesus got. In his own eyes, he was small. But Jesus said of John, “Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

Then think of Elizabeth; this aged saint, worthy of immense esteem, yet overwhelmed by the visit from her young, teenaged, pregnant, unmarried cousin— “*And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” Elizabeth was small in her own eyes.

Then Mary of course, the most blessed among women—there’s no woman in the world more blessed than Mary, yet she’s overwhelmed with the glory of the Lover of the lowly Whom she says in verse 48, “*...looked upon the humble estate of his servant ... for he who is mighty has done great things for me.*” Holy is His name!

All of them see themselves as inconsequentially small yet all of them are filled with great expectancy of what God will do for them through Jesus because there is in God’s eyes a great bigness in considering yourself inconsequentially small. It is for humble people God loves to do awesome things we did not expect. And isn't that exactly what God Himself has done for us in the gospel?

Look at these stories—all the people in these stories, born and unborn—and ask yourself right now, “Who is the smallest human being in this narrative?”

It's Jesus—the infinite has become finite, eternity has entered into time, the Maker of the universe has become an Embryo. He’s the smallest in the narrative and yet Who is the greatest in this narrative? It's Jesus. He’s the One Elizabeth worships. He’s the One John the Baptist leaps for joy before. He’s the One Mary has great expectations concerning. He’s the smallest but He’s the greatest. But this is only the beginning of His humiliation. He will stoop yet lower still, taking the form of a Servant, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross.

Nails, spear, shall pierce Him through,
The Cross be borne, for me, for you...

(What Child is This? By William Chatterton Dix, 1865)

He will go lower and become smaller than any human being has ever become and it’s precisely for this reason that God has exalted Him to the highest place and given Him the Name that is above every Name: Jesus Christ is Lord!

So He calls to His communion table those who see themselves as small—the weak, the weary, the humble, the poor, the hungry. He’s saying, “Come to My table.” But do you see yourself as great in your own eyes? Do you hold on to your own position and power and wealth and think, “That’s what will really save me; that’s where my joy really lies; that’s where I find my satisfaction”? If you hold on to your pride and the imaginations of your heart—self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction—then please don’t add to your condemnation by proudly partaking of these fruits of Christ’s humiliation. Instead, come to this table humbly.

We sing....

I come wounded to be healed
I come desperate to be rescued
I come empty to be filled
I come guilty to be pardoned
By the blood of Christ the Lamb
And I’m welcomed with open arms
Praise God, just as I am.

(Just as I am, by Travis Cottrell)

If that’s true of you—if you come to this table hungry and thirsting for God—listen to what Mary says, “He will fill you with good things.” If you’re small in your own eyes, God says He has great things in store for you. So let’s confess our need, our smallness, our desperateness, our emptiness and prepare for God to fill us afresh with the goodness of the riches Christ has purchased for us.

O Lord, when You came down into our world, You did awesome things we did not expect! When You come again, You will turn this world's values upside down and empty this world's treasures inside out. No eye has seen, no ear has heard of a God like You, Who works for those who wait for Him! So we come now, with eager hearts. We come broken to be mended, wounded to be healed, desperate to be rescued, empty to be filled. We come guilty to be pardoned by the blood of Christ the Lamb. And we trust in Your promise to welcome with open arms all those who come to you in Jesus Name. Amen!

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