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First Presbyterian Church  
December 23, 2018  
Luke 2: 1-14

### **“Exceeding Expectations”**

Well, we’re almost there! In less than 48 hours, Santa will have come, some of us will have already finished unwrapping our presents, and perhaps others will already be enjoying a mimosa. Merry Christmas!

We’re big fans of the Santa Nordic tracker in our house – which is Google’s way of following Santa around the world. We turn it on first thing Christmas Eve day and track Santa’s whereabouts. (story about Terry and I and Webster Groves.)

I have many presents left to wrap, an open house to host, and a couple more worship services to lead, but other than that, I’m done. And when I say done, I mean done! If you have to go to the grocery store, or God forbid the mall, Target or Walmart, I will pray for you. Seriously. Because it’s a madhouse out there.

At this point, I just hope that all of my preparations pay off, you know what I mean? I hope that everyone likes what I got them, that the meals I serve are tasty, and a nice dusting of snow covers the ground.

And perhaps you can relate – you, too, hope that everything you’ve done to prepare for Christmas pays off. The shopping lists you’ve carefully attended to, the baking you’ve done, the house you’ve decorated – whatever it is, you hope that the people you’re celebrating Christmas with will like what you’ve gotten them, will enjoy the meal you’ve prepared, and will (hopefully) be on their best behavior.

But if things should go awry, fear not! As the angel Gabriel told Mary, for you are not alone. The last Christmas Terry and I spent in Akron was also, for my Mom, one of the worst. And not because we were there! But because four extra people came for dinner, so there wasn’t enough food or seats for people. She can laugh about it now, but at the time it wasn’t so funny, because my Mom puts a lot of thought and effort into her seating arrangements, meal and table.

She wasn’t expecting those plans to be disrupted.

But truth be told, Christmas can be a stressful time for many of us. We often set ourselves up with unrealistic expectations for how the day should go. Maybe we have an expectation that we'll get just what we asked for, or we hope the present we give will be perfect and will generate the reaction we envision in our mind; or maybe we have a picture of everyone getting along and feeling like their jolly old selves. Norman Rockwell, here we come.

But does anyone's Christmas really resemble Norman Rockwell? Probably not, but that doesn't mean we don't hope for it anyways.

Why I read just last week that the Hallmark Channels' Christmas movies are getting more and more popular because they're hopelessly perfect. The plots, for their part, are also hopelessly predictable – a widower with young children in a small town; a family farm that needs to be saved; a young woman on the verge of marriage to the wrong man who finds true love while visiting a perfect bed and breakfast. Sometimes there is a lovable dog, a cookie business, ice skating, a snowball fight, and of course, a Christmas festival with the perfect amount of snow.

But not all celebrations are as dreamy and perfect as a Hallmark movie. Sometimes family members show up to celebrations stressed, depressed, angry or worried. Or unannounced! Rarely do people behave according to our plans! And when that happens, we run the risk of feeling disappointed and frustrated, because our expectations were not met.

But again, fear not! If this happens to you on Christmas, for you are not alone. The great comfort in the Christmas story is that no one's expectations went according to plan, but God showed up anyways!

The story of Christmas is set in a most stressful time when everybody felt out of control. Luke begins his story by telling us that a decree went out from Emperor Augustus demanding all the world be enrolled in a census. Well, no one likes living under a decree! Everyone's anxiety goes up when we live under decrees, whether they come from the government, our jobs, or our family, because none of us like command performances. Mary and Joseph weren't planning on heading home to Bethlehem; they were forced to go there; believe me, no woman 9 months pregnant wants to travel anywhere, let alone by donkey.

And Joseph, for his part, wasn't expecting to be engaged to a woman who was expecting a child that wasn't his. That was not a part of Joseph's plan.

But things don't always work out as planned, do they? People don't always behave according to our expectations. Joseph assumed he and Mary would get married and then settle down and have kids. But God had a different plan.

And that angel. Oh, that angel! Notice, friends, that angels disrupt lives! To marry Mary was completely outside the norm of what was socially acceptable. He violated all sorts of conventions by following the angel's command. It took an awful lot of faith on Joseph's part to trust what the angel said, that despite all signs pointing to the contrary, things really were going to be alright. Things probably felt far from "alright" for Joseph because the plans he had made and the expectations had gone severely off course.

And what about Mary? Mary, too, was not expecting an angel to visit her and tell her she was going to give birth to the savior of the *world!* Again, let me remind you, angels disrupt lives! Mary probably felt far from favored when the angel said, "Congratulations! You're going to be a mother!"

What the Angel Gabriel asked her to do put her in danger. King Herod had already killed two of his own children and a wife because he thought they were out to claim his throne, so killing Mary would have been nothing for him. And we have no idea of the hopes and dreams she had for herself. Giving birth would surely put a damper on her expectations.

We have this idea that Mary was perfectly in sync with what the angel told her. But who knows? Maybe she wasn't. And maybe all those frescoes and paintings that depict her as looking perfectly coiffed and at peace are just that – pictures – not reality.

You know, I have portraits of my children, and in those portraits they are clean and well pressed, too . . .because the artist painted them that way! At the open house, you'll see them; in Charlotte's portrait and how in it her hair is perfectly combed, her face is clean, and her dress is a dazzling white. But I can assure you, that is not what is in the photograph the artist used as the basis for the portrait. Her hair was never perfectly combed and her face was often dirty, because she wouldn't sit still long enough to get her hair combed or face washed and

sometimes, I just forgot! I also know that the dress she has on in the portrait isn't a dazzling white, it's brown with orange polka dots. The artist painted it white because Charlotte refused to wear the dress I chose for her.

If you look behind the portraits of my other children, you'll see in Henry's a mother who is 7 months pregnant with child number two, and in Tommy's a mother who is toting a 6 week-old around. She may be tired from travelling all day or staying up all night, and in some is thinking about the family that is at home, the things she needs to be doing there, and the job that awaits her both at home and at work.

That's what is behind my portraits.

And here's the thing . . . I think all of that is behind Mary's portrait, too. The images of her and the picturesque, peaceful settings are untrue. The hymn "Away in a Manger", while lovely to sing, is a lie. The cattle weren't lowing and the little Lord Jesus was probably not asleep in the hay, not crying. Newborns cry and they don't sleep. And, if it really is true that he was born in stable, stables are dirty. And so is childbirth, and that's all I'm saying about that.

The point is, things were not going according to Mary and Joseph's plans; things were far from perfect. But God showed up for them. God came not to a perfect family that is well pressed and perfectly groomed, not a perfect scene where everyone is sitting nicely for the pictures, or where everyone is feeling jolly and behaving according to our expectations, but a mess. And I don't know about you, but that brings me a lot of comfort, because things don't always go according to our plans, and we don't always get the holiday we wanted.

But we do get what we need at Christmas, which is the assurance that God loves us despite it all; and comes to be with us in the midst of it all; loves us despite our imperfections, comes to us even if our Christmas doesn't look like a Hallmark movie, try as we might for it to look like one. In the midst of all that stress and turmoil, God joined Joseph and Mary. And God joins us, too. One of the names we give to Jesus is "Immanuel", which means "God with us". God is not with us only when we are happy, successful, or healthy. The promise of Christ is that God is with us in every time and in every circumstance.

And that, my friends, is the message this story brings – that no matter what, God is with us, and God can be trusted.

This Christmas, my prayer for you is this: as you listen to the story and sing the carols, as you go through the next two days and tomorrow night and Christmas day's festivities, and even as the days wane on and Christmas seems like a distant memory, that you will remember that God comes to you because God loves you, and God can be trusted to handle all of your unmet expectations, or plans that go awry. So trust God. And while you're at it, share God's love with other people and with the world. Because the world needs God's love, God's beautiful, inclusive, far-reaching, audacious, and outlandish love.

Amen.