

Natalie Bell  
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 Fourth Sunday of Advent

***Great Expectations***  
***Matthew 1:18-25, Isaiah 7:10-16***

<sup>18</sup> *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about<sup>[d]</sup>: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet<sup>[e]</sup> did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

<sup>20</sup> *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>[f]</sup> because he will save his people from their sins.”*

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”<sup>[g]</sup> (which means “God with us”).*

<sup>24</sup> *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

The ***demands and expectations*** of Christmas are ***exhausting***, right?  
 I keep hearing about people’s ***plans*** for family, friends, presents, kids...  
 There are so many ***expectations*** this time of year.  
 To be with special people, exchange special gifts, share special time.

We ***demand*** a lot out of Christmas,  
 and we demand a lot of ourselves at Christmas.  
 I really believe it’s ***the expectations*** that make it so hard--  
 I mean at what other time of year do we expect ourselves  
 to have near perfect lives?

When ***December 25<sup>th</sup> comes close***,  
 we want a Martha Stewart home, and a Norman Rockwell family.  
 Just like the beautiful holiday cards.  
 And the Hallmark movies.  
***And NOTHING*** like ***real life***, right?

In real life, Christmas is *wonderful, and difficult*.  
 For most people, there is pain or loss that is magnified.  
 The *expectation* is that this is a holiday of smiles, joy, and laughter.  
 The *reality* is that it can be that—and a time of tiredness or tears.

Have you ever thought, all I want for Christmas is for *it to be over*?  
 I sure have!

It's a *crazy time* of year, with wild expectations...  
 And I wonder, how do all those expectations connect to the *real Christmas story*?

Well, what if there's a lot of *similarity* between the expectations  
 of our lives, and those that were placed on *Joseph*?

*Think about his story for a moment.*

Most of us know Luke's story of the angel visiting Mary.  
*But Matthew* uses Joseph to introduce the nativity,  
 because Matthew wants to highlight the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies,  
 like the Isaiah 7 passage today.

We know from Mathew's Gospel,  
 That *Joseph* was faced with many *demands and expectations* at this time.  
 Back then, a woman being found pregnant while engaged,  
 Was essentially a case of adultery!  
 It was infidelity, and the punishment could be *death*!  
 In the very least, a woman found to be pregnant outside her engagement  
 was subject to public *humiliation and shame*,  
 not just for her—but for her whole family!

And Joseph was a *righteous man*,  
 he knew exactly what was expected of him.  
 He knew he couldn't marry her,  
 but he also knew he didn't want to hurt her.  
 So, he chose to *go against all the expectations*---  
 even before the angel came to him in a dream.

Joseph chose to do something *unexpected*,  
 by dismissing Mary quietly, and sparing her public humiliation and shame.

He had a *choice*—do what was expected of any righteous man,  
Or *let go* of all that,  
and *let God* show love and mercy!

Joseph chose the *love and mercy*,  
even though he probably believed Mary had been unfaithful.  
He chose love even though he believed she had NOT.  
He chose love even though he *could have chosen* anger, heartbreak or self-pity.  
He could have chosen revenge.

Joseph knew all the *expectations* around him,  
And he chose something much *bigger* than himself.  
He called upon *God's own love and mercy*  
As he faced this disturbing turn of events.

And then the *angel came*, in that amazing dream.  
Telling him what to do and what would happen.  
Basically, it was God---saying:  
*I know this is not what you expect, but it will all be ok.*

That dream changed his life.  
He let go of *all* expectations and *married his beloved Mary*,  
He became the *father* of this baby who was not his own,  
by *naming* him Jesus, a name that means "*he will save*".

He lovingly took Mary to Bethlehem,  
He faithfully looked for a place for them to stay,  
he carefully helped her in that stable, as she gave birth.

And we know that after the birth, he continued to have faith and obey God from his  
dreams, because he took Jesus and Mary to Egypt  
To escape the evil King Herod.

We *don't know much* about the whole life of Joseph,  
except that he was a carpenter.  
And he surely taught Jesus about faith,  
because Matthew reminds us that he was a man of faith.

Some traditions assume that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry.  
 We don't know for sure—  
 but we do know a little bit about how he *dealt with expectations*.  
 When faced with tough choices,  
**he chose to let go of what others expected, and let God do something new!**

You know what Joseph's story teaches us?  
 It teaches us that the *love of God is bigger*  
 than any expectations!

So, what are you expecting of *yourself this Christmas*?  
 And what are *other people* expecting of you?  
 What if God is *calling you to let go* of all that?

If we look at the whole nativity story,  
 We see so many ways Mary and Joseph  
 had to *let go of practically every single expectation!*  
*None of this was what they expected* when they fell in love, right?

Mary--pregnant by the Holy Spirit--while engaged!  
 And Joseph still decided to marry her!  
 They were required to travel while she was nine months pregnant,  
 And couldn't even find a place to stay in Bethlehem!  
***There's so many situations they didn't expect,***  
 Things that probably stressed them out, just like it would us!

The truth is, *no one expected* the new King and Savior  
 to come from such *humble* beginnings,  
 And such a *scandalous* situation!  
 And none of it was a mistake!  
 God knew the whole plan, ahead of time.

***God knew how that first Christmas would have to be***  
***about letting go*** of expectations---  
 and ***letting God bring something new!***

***What if EVERY Christmas is supposed to be that way?***  
 For all of us who celebrate His birth?  
 What if ***WE are supposed to let go of what's expected,***  
 and let God bring us something new?

What if, just like Joseph,  
 God is coming to each one of US and saying:  
*I know this is not what you expect, but it's going to be ok!*

When I think about that, it makes me *smile*.  
 And it helps me take a *deep breath*.

Christmas is a mess in so many ways.  
 It is the most *wonderful*, and the most *painful* time of year.  
 It is the very *best story* of all time---  
 AND, it's a story full of *chaos, and pain!*

*How reassuring!*  
*We are not alone* in our pain.  
 We are not alone in our sorrow.  
 We are not alone in wanting things to work out a certain way,  
 and having to let go of all that—so that God can do something new!

*Isaiah* is known as the prophet of hope, especially during Advent.  
 Why?  
 Because he was speaking God's hope to the people,  
 during a very difficult time for them,  
 A time of pain, and persecution.  
 He was God's voice, saying to each one of them,  
*This is not what you expect, but it's going to be ok.*

So I wonder, how can we *let go* of some of our expectations,  
 And *let God bring* us something more?

I'm not saying that's *easy---*  
 We all have *struggles* at Christmas.  
 We want happy families and happy holidays,  
 and instead we have *real* lives—

At Christmas I really miss *my eldest son* Jacob. He's my prodigal.  
 It's one reason Christmas can break my heart, and bring tears to my eyes.  
 I am faced with a *choice* at Christmas, just like so many of you.  
 I can choose to *hang onto* a hurting heart, and unrealistic expectations.  
 Or, I can *grab onto the love* that IS around me---

The love of friends, family, and church.

We can all choose to *try and live up* to the wildly outrageous expectations  
Of Norman Rockwell families, and picture perfect homes.  
We can be like the wacky *Clark Griswold* in Christmas Vacation...  
and try and force those around us to enjoy a ‘good old fashioned family Christmas’

Or, we can *let go of all that*,  
and grab onto the love that IS around us.  
We do have love---if we are willing to see it, and receive it,  
Especially from our Savior Jesus.

Instead of trying to be picture perfect,  
What if we *let go, and let God bring something more?*  
Isn't that what happened that wonderful night long ago in Bethlehem?

*And what if we let go of trying to SAVE or FIX ourselves?*  
What if we just let Jesus save us, as he came to do?  
His name means *he will save*—and that's what we welcome at Christmas.  
The salvation of Jesus.  
That baby born in Bethlehem was born TO SAVE each and every one of us.

I read an interesting *definition of sin* this week in a commentary.  
It compared sin to trying to SAVE ourselves, or MINISTER to ourselves,  
instead of letting Jesus minister to us.  
Isn't that interesting?  
Are we trying to save ourselves?  
Or minister to ourselves?  
Or are we letting Jesus save us?

*I know, so often we feel this HOLE inside of us,  
and we DO try to fill it ourselves—*  
with work, or people, or stuff, food, or chemicals....  
And that IS sin, isn't it?

*Because what we REALLY NEED is for Jesus to fill that space, right?*  
We really need His salvation, don't we?  
And in the Christmas story,  
we are told that Jesus is Emmanuel—God With Us,  
The one who brings true salvation---that we never find on our own.

*We all need Jesus to save us,*  
 And we all need Him to show us how to find the love.  
 The love that IS around us,  
 When we let go of the crazy expectations, and grab onto God!

There's a great book called "*Stitches*" by Anne Lamott.  
 She says, our *lives are held together with stiches*...and sometimes all we can do is  
 hang onto the *hope and love* we find in each stitch...

*What if our lives are stitches---*  
 And we hang onto the hope and love?  
 What if we *helped each other hang on?*  
 What if we helped each other *get back up,*  
 after being knocked down by wild and unrealistic expectations?

There are so many demands, and expectations this time of year.  
 And it's so *tempting* to give in to all of it.  
 It's tempting to believe that we need to somehow meet the expectations.

But the truth is, *Christmas is more* than that!  
 The very *birth of Christ began by letting go of all expectations,*  
 and letting God bring love and grace into this world!

Friends, hear the *Good News* of the Gospel this Christmas:  
 The love of God is bigger than any expectation!  
 May we let those go,  
 and let God bring us salvation—  
 the light and love of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.  
 And for the One sent to save us, all God's people say: Amen