

Sermon for the 4th of Advent: Expecting the unexpected

Dear sisters and brothers,

the fourth candle of our advent wreath is lit. We are meeting here for the fourth time to prepare the way of the Lord. Many of my favourite Christmas carols have been sung. The Nativity Play has taken place and some of the angels, kings and princesses have gone home for Christmas. I for my part, have had my share of mulled wine, Christmas cookies and craft activities for this year. In the subway stations you can already listen to „silent night“ while you are waiting and most of you probably have a pile of wrapped gifts hidden away somewhere. Christmas is very near. Can you feel it?

I really made it a point to find the Christmas spirit among the hustle and bustle around me this year. Every morning I started out the day by reading my Peace Church Advent Calendar and I took time in the evenings to light a candle, hum a carol and read the Christmas passages in the Bible. But honestly, just like the years before, I got distracted over and over again. Thoughts like „What on earth could I give my Dad for Christmas?“ or „Shall I make a duck or a goose on Christmas Day?“ shot through my head and I found myself getting more and more tangled up in the stressful moments of Christmas preparation.

It's paradox how the advent season is supposed to be a season of waiting and expecting. A season of peacefulness and quietness. A time of loving, caring and deepening our relationship to God and his people. And yet for many of us, it's the most stressful time of the year in which reality is far from being as harmonic and peaceful as Christmas cards and carols suggest.

Why is that? I asked myself.

It's the expectations we have, I assume. We want everything to be ever so perfect for the holiday season. We are longing to prepare and eat delicious food, give and receive gifts that convey the love we have for one another and decorate our houses with candles, lights and ornaments to make it extra bright and beautiful. There is a whole package of jobs that come along with preparing the way of the Lord if we want to meet everybody's expectations. We know what to expect. We know what we are waiting and preparing for.

But what if we didn't? What if it all came as a complete surprise? What if we were preparing for something completely different and an angel suddenly stood in our doorway, telling us to change our plans. What would we say? What would we think? How would we react?

I would like to take you on a journey today to reflect on these questions. The journey will take us to a small town called Nazareth, to a girl called Mary who is visited by the angel Gabriel. Are you ready to meet the unexpected? Then off we go.

Nazareth is a small town in Galilee. It's located northeast of Jerusalem and has about 15.000 inhabitants, most of them are gentiles. The town is dominated by corruption. Roman soldiers pass by every day. Greek merchants come here to sell their goods. In short- Nazareth is not a holy place to begin with. Wouldn't we expect

God to choose a place like Jerusalem with its temple and the well educated believers to go with it?

We might. But it's God's choice to begin with the unexpected.

Nazareth is the home town of a young girl called Mary. She is a teenager, maybe around 13 or 14 years of age. Being female in those days means that she has no rights, no status in society and no education. And on top of that she is on the border between childhood and adulthood which leaves her with no power at all. Even in our context she wouldn't be considered mature enough to drive a car or be out on the street after midnight.

Would you choose her as a business partner or the bearer of a revolution that will change the world? God does. Again, that is unexpected. But God does not rely on the powerful and mighty. He chooses an innocent girl to play a key role in an act that shall answer all the promises of the Old Testament.

Mary is engaged to Joseph. We can assume that her marriage was pre-arranged by her parents long ago and although they are legally not yet wed, her parents have given a promise that binds her to Joseph.

Mary lives in an era in which the task in women's lives is to bear babies. In many Bible stories we see women praying for their dream of having a baby to come true. God eventually answers their prayers and in some cases he sends an angel to bring the message.

In Mary's case it's different. She is very young. She is not yet married and she is certainly not ready to have a baby yet. It's simply not time for her to become pregnant quite yet. But this story is not about Mary's time or plan. It's about God's timing and about his choice, even if it's unexpected and puzzles us at first.

So let us picture Mary who is busy with the preparations for her wedding. Maybe she's in the middle of sewing, maybe she is baking or cooking when suddenly an angel appears.

„The angel went to her and said, „Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, „Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

„Do not be afraid, Mary!“ Is that not asking a little much of this young woman who is completely taken by surprise of an angel suddenly standing in her kitchen? I imagine her trembling and shaking. But the greatest shock surely lies in the message that the angel brings: „You will give birth to a son.“ That alone would make her panick. But it's not only „a son“. It's the Son of the Most High.“ Mary is bound to think: „How can that be?

I'm not even married.

I'm to young.

How can my child be God's Son? "

She must think that this proposition is unbelievable. Unimaginable. Unconceivable. And while the angel is speaking, there must be this moment where she wants to cry out „No way! Do you know what you are asking of me? Why me? How come you have chosen me to begin with? Find a woman who is not in the course of getting married. Find a woman who has no man. Get out of my kitchen and let me live the life I am preparing for."

After all, Mary does not know the end of the story. For her this proposal endangers her life, her relationship to Joseph, the love and respect of her family, her neighbors, friends and the whole community.

She knows that there is a great chance that Joseph will abandon her, once he finds her pregnant with a child of a third party. And the penalty for adultery in those days is death. So how can she accept the angels request?

„Do not be afraid, Mary!"

„Peace be with you!"

Those are the words that the angel uses before he brings the message. These phrases can be understood both as words of assurance and a promise from God. A promise that Mary will bring forth a Son but also a promise that Mary won't be alone. The assurance that all will go well, if she just trusts in God and understands that she can always count on him. God is the first to offer his promise. And it's up to Mary to accept.

Many of you might ask whether or not she really has a choice to accept a request that comes from God himself. After all the angel tells her precisely what to do and commands her to name her child Jesus. Can we really imagine her saying: „Thanks for the offer, but it's inconvenient at the moment. Come again some other day!" Not really. Yet I don't want to see Mary's response as an act of unquestioning obedience and humility. In the past Mary has frequently been lifted up as a model of passivity for all women. God commands and she simply reacts.

I would like to take the trouble to meet the courageous, strong-willed Mary. For that, we need to take a closer look at her response.

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Can you hear her cheeky voice? Of course she obeys God's will in the end. But not without questioning Gabriel. Not without showing her doubt about how this all shall come about. Not without sharing her fears with the angel and receiving words of assurance in return. And the angels words are more than powerful: „Nothing is impossible with God!"

For me this sentence is the turning point of the story. Mary realizes early on that God's plans are much different from the expectations she has. She goes through stages of fear and doubt which are only indicated lightly in the Bible. But at last she trusts in the angels's promise. She believes the prophecy and finds peace and comfort in the words that are spoken. She opens her heart to God and accepts that her plan is not his plan. God warns us that that's going to happen. Again and again in scripture, we are reminded that God does not always do it our way, so why are we surprised?

We, too, have expectations just like Mary. We build a picture in our mind of what God should be doing in our lives, should be doing in our ministries, should be doing in our jobs and families. And then unexpected things happen, sorrows come and immediately we start to think: „ Why doesn't God care for me? What did I do wrong?“

How often do we think that God is not interested in us and our lives, just because our expectations are not met. The Christmas story tells us that that isn't true. That even in the most convoluted, unexpected events, God can be very present, very much at work and in this case at work to save the world.

It's God who offers his promise to us. It's him who sends angels through which he touches our lives. Just like Mary, we need to be alert to their arrival and open our hearts to hear their word.

Christmas doesn't happen because we have bought beautiful gifts and have the best-trimmed tree. Christmas doesn't happen because our house is neat, our kitchens smell of cookies and everybody is running around with a happy face. It's Christmas because of God's promise to Mary. It's Christmas because God has given us the most precious gift we could ever receive: He gave us his Son. And it's Christmas because his light shines brighter than all the candles and Christmas lights could shine together.

Mary wasn't prepared for the coming of the angel. Nor did she know what to expect in the days to come. Don't you think she would have chosen a beautiful hotel for the birth of her child? Wouldn't she have laid him in a cozy bed and had friends and family around, rather than ox and donkey, if she had been prepared? But Jesus was born despite the fact that there was no inn and no bed.

That is why we celebrate Christmas. Let us rejoice in God's promise

a promise of a lasting peace,
of lasting hope
of lasting joy
of lasting love

The promise of an everlasting King to rule his people with justice and truth, a king like David, but greater yet. A King who Isaiah calls Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. A King whose reign will never end. A King who looks after the poor and brings justice to the world. A king that has come to the world because God took unexpected paths and Mary trusted in them.

When we celebrate Christmas tomorrow and in the days to come, let us rejoice in the unexpected, the unplanned and the fact that we are never thoroughly prepared. Let us seek for the Christmas moments beyond the earthly traditions and let us prepare our hearts rather than our houses for the coming of the Lord. Let us reveal God's love and grace to the world around us. And let us celebrate the fact that Christ was born and seeks to be born in us again.

It is God who invites us. And like Mary, it is up to us to accept his invitation. May God guide you on the unexpected path. May he send his angels to you. And may you hear their words of assurance when life around you turns wild. May God's promise and the birth of his Son bring you joy and peace and fill your hearts with love. Merry Christmas to all of you.

Amen