

Title: Doubtful Expectation
Text: Luke 1 (Selected Verses)
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Expectation is a powerful thing. Tuesday week ago I flew to Melbourne for an advisory board meeting for Empart, an amazing church planting ministry that has already seen 10,000 churches planted in northern India, and has a vision for 100,000 churches by 2030. It was an early start; my flight left at 6am. Empart had arranged for someone to pick me up from Tullamarine to drive me to the office where the meeting was to take place. So the plane landed and I headed for the luggage pick up area, all the while thinking, 'How will I recognize my driver?' It was OK – I had a phone number. So I started dialing the number, at the same time walking past a bunch of chauffeurs holding those little signs with important people's names on them – important people who get a chauffeur. And then I saw it, just as I was putting my phone to my ear. There was a guy holding a little sign; 'Stu Cameron'. Awesome!

But here's the thing, and I am embarrassed to admit it, my first and lingering thought was this; 'How amazing is that! Someone with my name was on my flight! What a coincidence!' And so I kept on walking – right up alongside him, and just as the man holding the 'Stu Cameron' sign reached for his phone did I realize it.

His Stu Cameron was this Stu Cameron.

The driver holding a sign for important people was for me! And I almost walked past him. You see I had pretty much no expectation that I would ever arrive at an airport to find a driver holding my name. And because I had such low expectations I almost walked past the occasion where one was provided for me.

Here's the point; for a whole range of reasons, some of us have lowered our personal expectations of God to the point that tragically we can miss some of the amazing ways he provides for us. Some of us believe in the theory of answered prayer while in practice expecting God will never answer ours. God answers the prayer of important people, not people like us. Some of us are Christians in theory, saying we trust God with our needs, but in some ways are Functioning Agnostics – with little or no expectation that God will answer our prayers.

Expectation is a powerful thing, and if this season of advent and Christmas tells us anything, it's this; Christians should be the most expectant people on the planet. Let's pray:

Vantage Point is a 2008 film that tells the fictional story of an assassination attempt on an American President. What is unique about the film is that it tells the story from the perspective, or vantage point of seven different characters, including a TV producer, a secret service agent and a tourist. The same events are seen seven times – 23 minutes a time – through the eyes of seven different characters. As each perspective is offered one after the other, the whole story emerges.

In this season of advent we are looking at the Christmas story through from four different vantage points. Through the eyes of four central characters – Elizabeth, Zechariah, Joseph and Mary – we will experience four different perspectives in the same astonishing story. Through their eyes we will encounter the wonder and hope that is at the heart of Christmas. Last week Melissa began our journey with Elizabeth's story; this week we view the same events through the eyes of her husband, Zechariah.

In Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth loved God and each other. Both were children of priests, and according to Luke, righteous and blameless before God. Despite this, they lived with an aching disappointment – childlessness. In those days in that culture to have no children was considered as a tragedy, a disgrace and even a sign of God's punishment. The fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth come from priestly families and, in our terminology, 'good people', made their disappointment all the more surprising. But even in the stark introduction of Zechariah and Elizabeth's plight, we get a hint of greater things to come. You see like Zechariah and Elizabeth, other couples in the bible before them had experienced the pain of infertility; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. And each of these couples had also experienced the astonishing gift of a child through divine intervention. Was it possible Elizabeth and Zechariah would experience the same wonderful surprise? Let's pick up Luke's story:

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.
(Luke 1:8-10)

Zechariah was one of 18,000 priests that served Israel. The priesthood was highly structured and organized, divided into 24 groups. Each of those 24 groups was rostered to serve twice a year, one week at a time. Zechariah was serving in the temple precinct with around 750 fellow priests. Amongst their duties was the responsibility to conduct the morning service at 9am and the evening service at 2.30pm. Both services involved sacrifices being made on both the outer, and inner altars.

The inner altar was inside the sanctuary, or the holy place, which itself was separated from the holy of holies only by a curtain.

To enter the holy place was considered the greatest honor for a priest. Many priests would never have that honor in their lifetime. Each morning a list would be drawn up of those who had never entered the sanctuary and from that list lots were drawn to determine which priests would have that privilege that day. This particular day Zechariah drew one of the lots.

After the sacrifice was made and the altar cleaned of ash and debris, coals were taken by Zechariah and one other priest to the golden altar, just outside the holy of holies, where they would be used to burn the incense offering. The significance of the incense offering was thought to be threefold.

First, incense was expensive, made from up to a dozen different rare plants and spice lovingly and painstakingly manufactured by expert craftsmen.

To offer such a costly sacrifice was to honor God.

In 2 Samuel, a farmer offers King David some of his livestock to sacrifice to God. But David replies:

I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.
(2 Samuel 24:24)

A sacrifice that costs nothing honors no one.

Ancient incense had beauty (it's aroma) and worth (it's expense).

The biblical principle here is and elsewhere is worship that honors God is marked by beauty and worth.

You may have been here long enough to work out that we don't often use incense in worship. Some of you are thinking; that's right – offering incense is just an empty ritual. Of course that can be true, but not necessarily. The form of our worship is of little consequence compared to the heart with which it is offered. So called contemporary worship can be just as empty of meaning as ancient forms. Here's another thing I would say:

Shallow indifference is just as dangerous as empty ritual in worship.

What do I mean? Too many of us – including me – are care-less when it comes to gathered worship. We come ill-prepared. We turn up late. We wander in at 5 past, 10 past, quarter past...We would never be so cavalier, when we, say, visit the doctor. And when you think about it, corporate worship is our most important appointment of the week – at a set time we gather with other people to meet with the king of kings and the lord of lords – the creator of the universe and the redeemer of our souls!

Gathered worship involves a sacrifice – of our time in preparation and thought, of our energy, and yes, of our money. Together we present to God all that we are as living sacrifices offered not to receive God's favor, but in response to God's

favor. There is nothing more beautiful or honoring of God in worship than a community of believers who through prayer, and song and the Word offer themselves to him as living sacrifices. But I digress!

The second reason scholars suggest incense was offered as sacrifice, and I love this for its practicality, the temple precinct was effectively slaughterhouse with the stench of sacrificial animals always in the air. Burning incense was an ancient air freshener. Worship is always contextual – making sense for the time and culture and practicalities of the day.

Third, the offering of incense became synonymous with the offering of prayer. In Psalm 141, David prays:

May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.
(Psalm 141:2)

And so it was during the evening sacrifice just as Zechariah is making the offering of incense, he receives an unexpected answer to an almost forgotten prayer. Let's read on:

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth... Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."
(Luke 1:11-14, 18)

For four hundred years it seemed to Israel that God had been silent. For four hundred years, since the time of Malachi, there had been no prophet, at least none like the Old Testament prophets. For four hundred years Israel has prayed again and again, and cried out for the prophesied Messiah, a national saviour, because for four hundred years Israel has lived under occupation – first the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans.

Around this time the Pharisees developed a prayer that was prayed three times a day. Two thousand years later the Amidah is still prayed three times a day by observant Jews. The prayer includes a cry to God for the long awaited Messiah:

*Speedily cause the offspring of
Your servant David to flourish,
and let him be exalted by Your saving power,
for we wait all day long for Your salvation. Blessed are You, O Lord,
who causes salvation to flourish.*

After four hundred years of apparent silence, Israel wonders whether God has forgotten them.

And then Zechariah sacrifices some incense, just as thousands of other priests had for centuries before without incident, and has an encounter with the angel Gabriel.

Zechariah's encounter is unexpected because his expectation has withered away. For decades he and Elizabeth have prayed for a child and all they have heard is heaven's silence. For centuries all Israel has cried out for a Messiah and all that's been received is more misery. Zechariah's expectations in that small room were at an all time low.

'How can I be sure of this?' Zechariah is wondering out loud whether someone has slipped a strange herb into the incense and he is having a drug induced hallucination rather than a divine vision. But Zechariah's doubt is two-fold; not only does he doubt that God is speaking and second, that God can do what Gabriel says God will do. He and Elizabeth have their senior's card for goodness sake!

There's an irony here. Zechariah has the privilege of entering the Holy Place, the place the Jews believed was the dwelling place of God on earth. Zechariah enters into the very presence of God, but the last thing he expects to hear from God! One scholar put it this way:

Here is a story of a priest who was praying fervently but was not prepared for his prayers to be answered. He was officiating in the sanctuary itself, but he did not really expect to experience God's presence.
(Darrell Bock)

Let me bring it closer to home. How many of you believe that when we gather for worship we gather in the very real presence of God? The New Testament seems clear; where two or three gather in Jesus' name, there Jesus is in their midst. What's more we live in the age of the Spirit, where since the day of Pentecost God has poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh, when young women and men dream dreams of and from God and old men and women will see visions from the very heart of God.

So let me ask you another question; how many of you gather for worship expecting to hear from God?

I have been in church all my life. I've heard a lot of sermons containing a lot of information about God. I did some rough calculations this week. Since I was about 16 I have sat in church pretty much every week listening to messages. That's 30 years at 52 weeks a year – roughly 1500 sermons. Taking it a step further, if each sermon was around 3000 words, that 1500 times 3000 words – that's 4.5 million words I have heard about God – just on Sundays. That's a lot. The truth is my head is full of information about God. But as important as it is for me to grow in my knowledge about God, far more important is it for me to hear from God.

Most of don't need more information about God; our heads are swimming with facts about God. We don't need more information; we need to hear from God! It's when our heart is pierced with a word from God that our lives are irrevocably changed.

Information about God doesn't change us; revelation from God does.

After being picked up at Melbourne airport last Tuesday, I then attended the Empart Board meeting. It was an inspiring 4-5 hours hearing about what God was doing in India and other places. We closed the meeting with prayer. To be honest I wasn't particularly interested in praying – I just wanted to get back to the airport and get home. I was also anxious about how long this prayer meeting might go, because the Board was made up of mainly Baptist and Pentecostal Pastors, and you know how long Baptist and Pentecostal prayers can be. And so we prayed. It wasn't quiet, polite prayer; it was passionate, walking around the room, hallelujah and amen prayer. Despite myself, I was enjoying it. But to be honest, my focus was on the things we were telling God in prayer, not what God might say to me personally in prayer. And then it happened.

One of the Board members, Tim, who is a pastor from Tasmania came up behind me and laid his hands on me. Straight away I experienced an intense physical reaction – like electricity running through me. I know, I know – it all sounds like a cliché. But bear with me. Then Tim started to pray out loud. Now I don't know Tim and he doesn't know me. We met for the first time that day. The only thing he knew about me was that I was a Uniting Church minister and we had just finished a building project.

As Tim prayed he began to speak words he believed God was saying to me through him. He said that like when Moses had people who gathered around him to raise his tired arms as Israel engaged in battle, God would gather people around me to raise my tired arms. Now that's all every nice, but what Tim didn't know was that the Sunday before – right here after the 10am service after I called people forward to receive the rest of God, I was standing down here with my hands raised in worship, with my eyes closed as we said 'let the ruins come to life.' What Tim didn't know that as I raised my hands in worship, some beautiful women in our church, prompted by God, came up behind me and held up my arms. When they did it, I thought it was a little strange, but really nice. Now, just three days later, God was telling me that what those women did symbolically, God would do spiritually. How awesome! But Tim wasn't finished praying.

As Tim continued to pray, I had a vivid image of a lighthouse come into my mind. It was totally and completely random, or so I thought. But then, after no more than 3 seconds of that image coming into my mind, Tim said something like this, 'I believe God is saying that your church is going to be a lighthouse for your city, the nation and for the nations.' By this time I am thinking, 'Tim, keep on praying man, keep going!'

I went down to a Board meeting in Melbourne with people I didn't know with close to zero expectation of hearing anything from God and God nails me with two beautiful, reassuring prophetic promises. I left for the airport with the unshakeable conviction that God was with me and for me. How good is God!

Zechariah doubts whether God is speaking to him, and if he is, that God can do what he says – give him and Elizabeth the child they have desperately longed for. Here is how God responds to Zechariah's doubts:

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

(Luke 11:18-20)

Here's the irony; Zechariah is looking for a sign that God is speaking and will act and the sign he given is that he won't be able to tell anyone what he has seen and heard! The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah in effect, 'Just be quite for a while and watch God work.' He is given the sign of silence. Darrell Bock puts it this way:

Sometimes underestimating God is as dangerous as rebelling against him.

(Darrell Bock)

Zechariah enters the holy place with little or no expectations that God hears his prayers, or if he hears them, will answer them. Years of crushing disappointment has squeezed expectation out of him.

Your story may be similar in some way to Zechariah's. You have prayed and pleaded with God for healing, or a partner, or a rebellious son or daughter, or perhaps like Zechariah and Elizabeth, for a child. And it seems all you hear from heaven is silence and you wonder, like Zechariah whether God has forgotten you.

You sing, 'God is Able' but wonder in your heart if God really is willing.

So you have stopped praying, stopped pleading, stopped expecting. It's easier that way.

You see, we lower our expectations of God in the mistaken belief we will protect ourselves from disappointment. All we do though is squeeze any need to trust God out of our lives and so deny ourselves the adventures in faith God longs for us.

Faith believes God for the seemingly impossible. Without faith, the bible says, we cannot please God. The proper posture before God is faith-filled dependence.

God didn't forget Zechariah, and God hasn't forgotten you.

Here's the really cool thing; Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child in the end received the son they longed for, but not just any son, the first prophets recognized by the bible in 400 years, and not just any prophet, but the one who would prepare the way of the Lord.

God hadn't forgotten Zechariah and God hadn't forgotten Israel. The longed for Messiah was coming!

Here's something we shouldn't miss. The name Zechariah means 'God has remembered'. God never, ever forgets his promises or us; God always remembers.

When Elizabeth's baby is born, her friends and relatives want to name him Zechariah. How appropriate; God has remembered. But Elizabeth insists that his name should be John. So her relatives asked Zechariah what his name should be:

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.

(Luke 1:62-64)

Zechariah means God has remembered. And John means 'God is gracious – has shown favor.'

In the end, Zechariah and Elizabeth received from God far more than what they had asked for or imagined or even deserved. And Israel will receive a saviour who won't simply restore the nation, but who will save the world.

This is grace! Grace bleeds from every page of the bible!

And the grace they received is the grace in which we now stand. God longs for us to come to him with hearts wide open and expectations high. More than a hundred years ago, Andrew Murray said this:

Faith expects from God what is beyond all expectation.
(Andrew Murray)

God, help us to believe you for what is beyond all expectation! Lord we believe; please help our unbelief.