

Sermon by Mrs. Elisabeth Sweeney-Smith, President of the Congregational Federation
Advent Online Service 2024

Our readings today are fairly traditional ones for this time of year

We have the story of Joseph getting an unexpected visit from an angel who gives him some wise advice about what to do with the unexpected news his fiancé had given him.

We heard about shepherds who also had an unexpected night out on the hills outside Bethlehem guarding what may have been the flocks used as offering for the Temple.

Laying on their backs looking up to the night skies they saw and heard angels.

We also heard in our opening carol about the Angel Gabriel calling on a certain young woman describing her as highly favoured because of some equally unexpected and life-changing news.

So, in Hearing the Word of the Lord today we will be looking at Expecting the Unexpected with God and what to do about it when you do.

The prophet Isaiah over many years had given promises of HOPE coming to the people of Israel from the root of the stump of Jesse

– the kingdom of DAVID. something that had long ceased to be a power in the region.

Isaiah speaks that of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

Upon the throne of David and over His Kingdom to order it and establish it with judgment and justice for that time forward even forever.

Well that hope had clearly not yet been fulfilled for the Jews at the time of Jesus' birth

However, this message of hope for Jews ruled by the mighty Roman empire was about to come to fruition but in a totally unexpected way

How many of us listening to this sermon are still doggedly holding on to hopes that we believe are promises to us of God for our own lives, for our families and promises in the lives of our churches.

How many of us see nothing but lack of fulfilment on the verge of giving up?

However, if we have heard from God as Mary, Joseph and those shepherds did then

We need to hold on

Because God honours his word . The author of Psalm 138:2 tells us that

You have magnified your word above all thy name.

And

The prophet Isaiah writes about God's promises

Chap. 55: 11

So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Even back in the accounts in the book of Numbers the authors of that book

Make it very clear that unlike the untrustworthy nature of humankind's inability to keep to their word God can be trusted.

Numbers 23:19

God is not a man that he should lie, neither the son of man that he should repent.

Hath he said and shall he not do it or hath he spoken and shall he not make it good

If God has spoken through a specific word to you I encourage you to keep trusting God to make it happen.

But be prepared for it to happen in an unexpected way and in God's timing.

Of course you may need to check with a mature Christian friend whether you have heard correctly or

whether you have actually not realized that the promise has already been fulfilled in your life and you have simply not seen it.

Perhaps you think you have never heard from God and therefore God's word only comes through the Bible – which it does of course through Scripture to us.

Well often we do not realize that even our dreams or creative thinking is a method God uses to speak to us.

THINK OF Joseph it was waking up that he realized he had been spoken to in a dream

I suspect those shepherds thought they were having a dream out there in the open fields looking up to the skies as the angel choirs assembled before them

The shepherds at least had a few of them to confirm to each other what they all had experienced

Maybe you are someone for whom the promises of God specific to you have been fulfilled and this is something that encourages you to trust God

The He will honour His Word for whatever is still outstanding.

Have a think about what promises you believe are yet to be fulfilled in your lifetime

The same spoken word that brought creation into being and that breathes LIFE into all who believe in Him.

The same WORD that God honours above even His Name is

Jesus the Word become flesh somewhere in a remote outpost of the roman empire

And because of His divine nature who is the same yesterday, today and forever

There are so many great promises recorded in the Bible let us make ourselves more conversant with them

In my youth we used to have a promise box with tweezers for pulling out and unfurling and hoping the one you pulled out meant something for you

Now we all know that individual biblical texts in order to be understood with the mind need the original context so pulling verses out of a promise box

or closing your eyes and opening the bible randomly is not perhaps the best way of finding out what God is saying to you.

But then we must not exclude the possibility that the Spirit of God can breathe life into an individual Scripture as it pops into our head or we hear it mentioned by someone else or it falls into our lap in our daily reading

Jesus said

The Spirit of Truth will bring all things to your remembrance what I said to you.

So let us not make the mistake of thinking that the only way we can fully understand God's promises are if we have studied the Bible in depth over many years

Joseph was not an educated man nor learned man in the Hebrew Scriptures even if he was a devout Jew, he knew his trade as a carpenter and clearly he was able to sense when it was God speaking to him.

when he heard the Word of the Lord to not break off the engagement with Mary he must have felt rather confused because as a Jew he would have wanted to follow the correct cultural traditions –

God was asking him to do something very unusual but he was convinced of its rightness even if he did not understand what was going on

Mary certainly when she heard the news of what would happen to her in the coming months must have felt equally befuddled but she trusted in the wisdom of the God of Israel

And as for the shepherds,

men who knew the contours of the night skies,

when they saw the angelic hosts it was not the sort of evening they usually had and maybe put it down to too much of the hard stuff.

The message to go and find a Messiah a Saviour lying in a manger would have seemed like an oxymoron to the shepherds

I doubt they would have used that term but perhaps one of them laughed and said

What our future King and Saviour lying in a cattle trough ?– you’ve got to be joking!

Whatever reaction the shepherds or Joseph or Mary may have had besides the ones that are recorded the important thing is that their actions proved that they believed the messengers.

Those shepherds got up and went to see this thing in Bethlehem

Mary sang her Magnificat

And Joseph did the right thing and protected his fiancé and the unborn child growing in her womb.

All of these characters could not have possibly dreamed of such big events happening in their lifetimes.

And none of them could have envisioned what the outcome of their obedient actions would be

That is the nature of Trust – we have to take risks when we don't have all the facts

We take someone at their Word

I suspect most of us have at some point has given someone the benefit of the doubt and lived to regret it

But I can tell you that if you trust in God He will never let you down.

God is the best bet ever!

But what has all this got to do with Advent you may be asking

When the message is often one about the second coming of Jesus to make all things new or a hope of final judgment for the world

Often

Advent is the time when each week we look at the themes of Love, Joy, Peace and Hope

And I hope today's service and other services you watch or attend will incorporate these themes as we prepare our hearts for the arrival of Jesus

In the Christian calendar

The coming of the Baby Jesus as Immanuel, or God with us is something that brings peace, joy, love and hope.

If we look at the word Advent it may help us to make the connection to my theme of expecting the unexpected

The Latin verb Advenire means to arrive

The root meaning being something about to happen

If you lengthen the word to Adventure

this means something exciting unusual

People leave their fixed lives and set sail on the adventure of a new life

Or you might ask your grandchildren what adventures have you been up to this week?

Advent has something of that risk element about it

It is almost as if we are on the precipice of something unusual on the horizon about which we are not 100% sure

There is an element of the unknown about the Adventure in the Christian pilgrimage

Starting with belief in the Christmas story

And that is what the coming of Jesus is about = an invitation to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as the means to salvation

We do not have all the answers to the nature of his birth and what it means nor of his death and resurrection but we do have the eye witness accounts to guide our thinking and what Jesus said about his own story for us to think about

We have the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah that hinted at these amazing promises that came to pass 2000 years ago

We today have promises in God's word that are yet to be fulfilled

Justice and Peace to reign for an end to war and poverty and all the selfish ways of humankind

We as bearers of the Name of Christ can only turn to what we believe he has promised us will be the outcome of our faith.

But like Joseph, Mary and the shepherds we must not just ponder these things

but live our lives as if we believed and in so doing we honour God

If any of us have experienced an angelic visitation please share it with others

Or those who have heard the voice of God and written it down as Isaiah did let others know

Just as the witness accounts of the early disciples were written down don't let your testimony of God's faithfulness to you be left undocumented

Let us be bold and believe in the promises of God whether they be eternal promises of Hope written down by faithful people and collected in the Holy Bible

or whether

We have received a personal promise from God about something about to change in our lives

Just because we hear from God or see his promises fulfilled in an unexpected way

Should not deter us from realizing that He has kept his word to us.

As Mary sang in her magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord

He has kept he promise he made to our ancestoers and has come to the help of his servant Israel

He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.

Thanks be to God for all that he has done but especially in the promise that was fulfilled in and was witnessed by Mary, Joseph and the shepherds all those years ago.

Amen.