

## “Are You Expecting?”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, December 20, 2009

Last year during advent I had the opportunity to gather birth stories from members and mothers in this congregation, (not only in anticipation of Christmas, but in celebration of little Ms. Lyla Lavanhar, then the newest child among us.) I cannot believe it has already been a year! In that sermon, I shared many birth stories in our congregation. They're stories of persistence and of loss, of wonder and disappointment, of control and lack of control. This congregation's birth stories are stories of expectation, synchronicity, and surprise.

How we come to be, I learned through talking to you, is not as simple as the movies might suggest: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, boy and girl get married, have children and live happily ever after. In the midst of that fairytale are the complications and the interventions of life. And in the midst of the miracle of life, are the real intersections of individual human lives – the kind of interruptions and the exceptions that we reflect on this advent season. Families, even our families right here in this church, do not always look like the world would expect. And our best laid plans? Well, when it comes to love and children, you might as well just lay them to rest. Among the stories in this congregation, are incredible tales of fertility difficulty, of unexpected pregnancy, and unexpected loss, and of children not born from their mother's womb per se, rather carved from their parents' hearts. But one thing is consistent across all birth stories and adoption stories. Every child is labored; and every birth a miracle.

My own birth story contains planning – intense planning. You may not be surprised, as I have always been a planner. My story is also about keeping my own mother guessing, even from the beginning. My parents had been trying for several months, and I was conceived in November, nine months and a couple of weeks before my father was to get out of the Navy. November was the month I HAD to be conceived so I could be born at the Naval hospital. There was really no plan B past November.

My mom says everything was very sterile and gruff at the Naval hospital. She was only twenty years old, and my father a year older. Even though he was on staff at the hospital, he was not allowed to attend the birth. After I was born, I was cleaned up, showed to her briefly, and then whisked away to the nursery. The first time she was actually able to hold me was the next day. She was wheeled down to the nursery, dressed head-to-toe in pink attire supplied by the hospital. She gave the nurse my name: *Tamara Celeste*. The nurse came back, and was about to hand her the baby, when she said, “Now be careful, the baby will be a little sore for awhile.” (It was at this

point in hearing the story for the first time that I expected my mom to tell me I had been dropped on my head or something.) Instead, my mother said she was baffled too, and asked the nurse, “Why?” To which the nurse replied, “Well because he was circumcised this morning.” Surprise! My mom looked at the nurse in disbelief and handed that baby right back to her, insisting, “No... I had a girl.”

So from the beginning there has been a barrel full of surprises for my mom, surrounding me. I doubt that she could have believed, when she finally held me that day, that I would grow to age 16 and live overseas. Or become a minister. I’ve just been full of surprises. But maybe there were a few hints from when I was younger, that one day in my twenties, following a marriage and divorce, I would call her from Texas (14 years ago now) and tell her that I was in love – with Jill. But just as she has embraced all of my surprises, she has embraced her would-have-been “son-in-law” as a second daughter, with open arms.

Needless to say, I have probably kept her doing a lot of guessing over the years. And even though the path that has led me to where I am today seems so contrived on one hand, so full of grace, so obvious *now*... in hindsight, it certainly wasn’t that way from the start. I knew I wanted a family. I knew I wanted a loving relationship (one where we are each other’s biggest fans) and I knew I wanted a job to which I could give all of my gifts. Maybe I’m naïve, but some of the most amazing outcomes in my life – some of the most significant decisions and difficult risks – have seemed to be incremental decisions simply stacked on top of one another. I have often been asked, “How did you do that? How did you leave everything that was familiar at 16, and go overseas, alone, to live with 3 different families, when our country was at war, not knowing – at all – what to expect?”

My answer as a teenager is the same now, but rings more profound today: “I just got on the plane.” And I did. I simply got on the plane. How did I do it? I filled out an application one day. Packed my bags another. Put one foot in front of the other, and just got on the plane. It seems so simple. It did require an enormous amount of faith in the world, and I can now also acknowledge a safety-net of privilege surrounding me. But despite any disappointments, struggles, frustrations, or loneliness I encountered there (or in any of my risk-taking) what I have learned is that leaps of faith that force me to be vulnerable, that push me into the unknown, that insist I let go of the outcome and release my expectations, have *a/ways* been worth it. The risk of pain may be greater, but so is the amount of possible return.

Ten years ago if you had told me that I would be here, now, in front of you, preaching, I would have told you that you were insane. I was teaching high school and I loved it. I loved my students.

I held extremely high expectations of them and they consistently met or exceeded them. We read *Camus* and *Ionesco* in FRENCH. I directed a one act version of *No Exit* by Jean Paul Sartre in FRENCH that my seniors performed while their competition did children's stories. They were amazing! And I didn't know they couldn't be. So I asked a lot from them, and they gave.

Becoming a minister was one of those risk-taking journeys as well. It started with simply going to church, then teaching a few classes there, then looking up the requirements, filling out an application, going to a seminary interview, etc. Don't get me wrong, it was not an easy path. I worked hard. But mainly it was grace that it just happened to be the right time. It was the right time for me, for my internship church, for a sabbatical ministry, for my ordination, and the right time to lead me on a journey that landed me here.

So what I have learned about expectations is that if you want your "right now" to be different, all you have to do is *get on the plane*. Do the next most realistic thing. Take the next step you can take. It sounds deceptively simple. But right now is the only time you have to begin to make decisions that will change your life. I couldn't expect then, that I would be where I am now, (although I dreamed of it.) But I could expect the next realistic baby step. Fill out the application, take the next class, get dressed, get in the car. You get the picture.

In my reading on expectations this week I found article after article that says the key to happiness is to lower your expectations. Research has shown that Denmark is actually the happiest nation in the world, with two-thirds of their population reporting that they are very satisfied with their lives. And the reason they are so satisfied, these researchers cite, is because Danes have low expectations that are consistently met. Now Danes also tend to be healthy, partnered, and active, which are all contributing factors to their happiness. But researchers claim Danes also have low expectations, and so "year after year they are pleasantly surprised to find out that not everything is rotten in the state of Denmark." About once a year, some new study confirms Denmark's status as a happiness superpower. The Danish people receive this news with reluctance, and newspaper headlines invariably read: "We're the happiest lige nu." *Lige nu* is a Danish phrase that means literally "just now." So, "We are the happiest – just now."

I think the researchers have it all wrong. The emphasis should not be on the data they have gathered on these low expectations. Low expectations do in fact dull pain, but they do not lead to happiness. I think the key to Danish happiness is right there in their response. It is about *lige nu* "just now." It's about doing what you can do in the moment, to change your now. When the world is so pregnant with possibilities, there are likely hundreds, or thousands, of outcomes better than we could possibly imagine. But if your expectations are rock bottom why would you take any significant

risks? It is the success of a significant risk that leads to the highest possible return. Stepping into the unknown and surviving is what leads to gratitude, and gratification, and happiness. Because that is how we keep learning and growing and thriving. So, if we can keep our expectations high, be guided by our values like a star in the east, and hold loosely to outcome making room for grace, then I believe we will see and feel increased happiness.

One place where expectations can be the most cumbersome is when we have expectations of another person's behavior. It's called the *Pygmalion effect*. Named after the short story turned into *My Fair Lady* (only my very favorite musical) the Pygmalion effect is the idea that one's expectations for a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations. (Brehm & Kassin, 1996) So in a school-based example, the teacher forms expectations. Based upon these expectations, the teacher acts in ways that presume these expectations. The teacher's treatment tells each student (loud and clear and often non-verbally) what behaviors and achievements are expected. If this treatment is consistent, it will tend to shape the student's behavior and achievement. Over time, the student's behavior and achievement will conform more and more closely to the teacher's expectations.

It is also true in relationships between spouses, with family and children, and friends. What we expect hardly ever disappoints us in that way. So if you expect to be in an argument with your family over the holidays, likely, sadly, you will. And some part of your unconscious behavior can lead to it. Our expectations are most often crafted from categories created from our past experiences, and so when something new comes along, we try to cram it into one of those old boxes. When it doesn't fit at all, sometimes we reshape what's in front of us to fit our expectations. And sometimes *that* doesn't work and we have to make a brand new category. But that takes much more effort and willingness to let go.

Expectations can be a big stumbling block for us, both personally and communally. There is an old story about a man who hunted rabbits, that illustrates this well. One day, when he was out in the woods, a rabbit ran past him and collided with a tree stump, knocking itself unconscious. The man couldn't believe his good fortune, as he put the rabbit in his game bag. Every day for the rest of his life, he came back and watched the stump, waiting for this to happen again. Not useful. So where in your life are you sitting by the stump instead of taking a single step to change your life right now?

The *abbas* and the *ammās*, the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived as hermits in Egypt and the Middle East in the Third to Fifth Centuries, were often visited by spiritual seekers who asked them for guidance. One among them, Abba Nilus, when asked about expectations advised,

"Do not be always wanting everything to turn out as you think it should, but rather as God pleases, then you will be undisturbed and thankful in your prayer." And grateful and happy.

And so it is at this time that we come to celebrate advent. We wait for things to turn out, not only as we expect, but as God pleases. Advent is a holiday that celebrates the waiting for another holiday. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus* which means "coming" or "expectant waiting." Christians believe that the season of advent serves a reminder, both of the original waiting that was done by the Hebrews for the birth of their Messiah, as well as the waiting of Christians for the return of Christ. Advent is about anticipating the arrival of the Divine in the world. Expecting it. And the birth of Jesus, a child born from such unexpected circumstances, is our reminder that the Divine comes in many shapes and sizes. The Jews were definitely not expecting their Messiah to come in this container. He was supposed to be a great King! And so many may have missed the messiah among them. As it is today, if we only expect the Divine to come in a familiar package, the Bible suggests we will likely be surprised. For Jesus came, according to Matthew, not only through the typical Judaic male lineage, but also through several unlikely women. Through these women, and the Hebrew Scriptures in which they appear, we learn that presented into this unlikely bloodline of Jesus is: prostitution through Rahab and Tamar, incest through the stories of Tamar and Judah, adultery, treachery and murder with the stories of David and Bathsheba, tainted (and racially despised at the time) Gentile blood through Ruth, and last but certainly not least, with Mary: teenage pregnancy outside of wedlock.

All of these unlikely and culturally rebellious events had to transpire in order to give rise to the birth of Jesus. In the book of Matthew, we are drawn to focus on the Divine though the unexpected: the conflict, the fear, the risk, and the ingenuity all surrounding the birth of Jesus. It is during advent when Herod sends the Kings to find the baby Jesus. It is during advent that Mary and Joseph pack up on a donkey, and ride all the way to Bethlehem for the census. Mary cannot possibly expect to manage the ride all the way to Bethlehem in her last months of pregnancy. She must manage moment by moment: to first climb on, and then make it to the next stop. This unlikely couple could not possibly have expected the doors of Bethlehem to fling open to them just because Mary was with child. But they could expect that one would. And so they kept knocking on doors, not giving up, until the miracle happened. Therein is a lesson for us all.

Who gets to decide when our story is through? Not us. Or when it begins? Maybe something bigger and better awaits beyond this current disappointment. When a family is expecting a child there is no way to rush this process. And that is what is expected: time to prepare. Time to pay attention to the incremental changes that will turn into a life of its very own. The waiting that is

the advent holiday is that kind of anticipation – a kind of paying attention, a kind of preparation for the baby Jesus, who grew up to teach people about love and generosity and forgiveness and justice. It is preparation for this story of hope in the midst of our darkest time on Earth. It is a time to make room in our hearts for a story that has touched generations. A story that tells us, even in our darkest moments, to love anyway. Risk anyway.

Advent is about how the Divine often comes into the world in ways we could not possibly expect, right we need it most. This time last year, newly called to this congregation, I would not have expected to have grown so much in my ministry here. I am a better minister because of this congregation, because of you. Because you have made room for me to change and grow in our time together. To experiment and play. To make mistakes and make amends. Since our arrival over three years ago, Jill and I have settled in ways we never thought possible. We have settled into what we call our retirement home on the river, with careers we both love, working with and for people we truly enjoy. We have a network of friendships in our life like we have never had before. And so this advent, during this time of expecting, I want to share with you, something that a year ago we only dreamed of: Jill and I are expecting.

I am 14 weeks pregnant. Due June 19<sup>th</sup> (or Juneteenth.) And we both expect, without a doubt, that we will be better parents because we have this community – this congregation – to raise our child in. In our expecting, we look around at the recently-born in this congregation: Lyla and Audrey, Roman and Janie, Circe, Margot, and Zane, and so many others, and think, “These are the children who will surround our child as he or she grows up.” This will be the community into which he is born. These will be her playmates. These will be the children he looks up to. And we know we are blessed.

So this advent, what are you expecting? Keep your expectations high. Hold on to outcomes loosely. Make room for Grace. And expect the Divine.

Amen.