

December 23, 2018
“Unexpected: Unconventional”
Luke 1:57-80

This morning we pick back up in our Advent series: Unexpected. So far we have been looking at Luke chapter 1 as we anticipate and prepare for the celebration and birth of Jesus in Luke 2. That will be tomorrow so come on back!

So to bring all of us up to speed here, especially for those who may be new this morning and since last week we had the Christmas concerts, which by the way were just amazing.

We left off two weeks ago, with Mary getting an unexpected visit from the angel Gabriel who tells her some unbelievable news that she will give birth to a son, and it will all be in the most unconventional way imaginable. A virgin birth, the Son of God, Jesus, the savior of the world, Immanuel... God with us.

Let's just take a moment to pause and take that all in.... Think about the details... the events of all that has happened so far in Luke chapter 1... All the unexpected, unbelievable and unconventional ways in which God has been work bringing His promises to reality, His love made flesh ,the greatest gift ever. Jesus.

I have really come to appreciate the Advent season and this year happens to be my 10th year celebrating Advent. The reason for that is...

As I have shared before, In the small baptist church I grew up in we celebrated Christmas but the Advent season just wasn't part of our tradition . Advent was a calendar with little doors and behind each door was a chocolate for that day as we counted down the days toward Christmas. Which I mean, come on... is not such bad tradition either.

But I have really come to enjoy the rhythm and season of Advent and taking the time to prepare and focus on Jesus and the promises of God that are so present at Christmas as we experience the hope, peace, joy and love that comes through Him.

One of the things many of us at FPC have been reading through this Advent season that I personally have found helpful and insightful is “Preparing For Jesus” by Walter Wangerin.

From it and through our time in Luke we discover the season of Advent is truly a season of miracles. As we look at the first advent and coming of Jesus we discover over and over again the impossible becoming possible through God in unexpected ways, unbelievable news and unconventional events.

And in our passage this morning we find another unconventional event taking place.

We learned back in the first part of Luke 1, that Zachariah and Elizabeth were an older couple who had no children as Elizabeth was barren. Zachariah, who was a priest, was chosen that year to go offer the incense in the temple.

And while there, doing his priestly duty, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that although he and Elizabeth were old, and she was barren, God was going to give them a son and he would be named John. The one who will prepare and make way for the long promised messiah- Jesus.

Now, In that moment I believe Zechariah like many of us would've been, was a bit overwhelmed, a bit terrified, maybe even confused at what was all happening. This news was unexpected, and unbelievable so he had his doubts. "How can this be? But because of his doubt he was made silent.

Then as promised by God ,Elizabeth did conceive and so here we are nine months later and the miracle comes to be and she gives birth to a son.

And this is where our passage picks up. There are two parts to this passage, the birth and a naming of a child, which is what I want to focus on, and then Zechariah's song which you can find more detail about from our advent series a couple years ago.

Luke 1:59- On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.

This got me thinking about names and the whole naming process that we as parents, and our parents, and their parents go through. Names and choosing names for kids is or can be an interesting process if you think about it.

Are there any juniors here? Or anyone carrying a family name?

Thats the thing... some names have a tradition of getting passed down from generation to generation. For others they wait until the child is born and then give a name I dunno based on how the child looks or acts. Either way it's an interesting process in naming children.

Like I have three other siblings, and all our names begin with the letter "J". Josh, Jason, Jennifer, and Jaime.

My wife Tina and I, we had our own process in naming our four girls. We would bounce back list of names and meanings of names, crossing off names, narrowing it down until we had a name. But a lot of thought went into our whole process.

Some names were crossed off because it brought up bad memories or negative associations we had with other people with those names. I won't share those names as some of you have that name, and I like most of you;)

Also as part of our process we looked through the tunnel of time and thought through things that might create a bad experiences for our kids based on their name Along with that we also put names through the name game test.

You remember the name game right?

“Jason, Jason Bo-Ba-Son, bo-na-na fanna Fo-fas-on. fee fi mo-mas-on, Jason!” No problem there, right? But some names end up rhyiming with potty words. Name rhyiming can be dangerous. Right?

Then of course there is also my last name, “Emberger”, which sounds a lot like hamburger. I was reminded of this constantly growing up and so when Tina really liked the name Wendy... I had to remind her of this and even though Wendy is a cute name... Wendy Hamburger not so much. If we went with that she probably would be born with red hair and freckles.

So we ended up with four first and middle names I think are pretty great.

Corinne Mattea, Ainsley Karis, Morgan Calysta and Penny Avienda. And totally unplanned their first initials spell C.A.M.P. and it is in age order.

But in the case of naming a child in our passage this morning we encounter some drama unfolding and tension rising.

At some point in this circumcision ceremony, the name Zechariah is being given to the baby boy, Elizabeth interjects, and says, “No! He is to be called John.”

I imagine it was one of those moments where everything pauses and you can just feel the tension rising and awkwardness of the situation. Confused silence all around and all eyes and attention are now on Elizabeth.

They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.It’s not even a family name.”

So why the tension here, what’s the big deal?

What’s in a name? Right?

You ever hear that phrase “whats in a name”? If you think about it, a name is usually the first piece of information we have about a person and so a name is kind of important. Even more so In that culture, in that time and in that tradition a name was very important it was more than just a name.

Proverbs 22:1, "A good name is more desirable than great riches." Names were so important and a good name meant more than even a good reputation, because it often identified the character of the person carrying it.

Names mattered, tradition mattered and so it would've just been expected and obvious that the first born son would carry on a family name and so it's no wonder it says:

“they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.” Tradition!

I can hear just hear Tevye from Fiddler on the roof. “Tradition.”

They were going to name him Zechariah after his father...They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.”...they began motioning to Zechariah to find out what name he wanted to give him.

Who is this “they”. It reminds of when talking about something or whatever and someone chimes in “well ya know what they say”. Or “They say... fill in the blank... “they say if it aint broke why fix it.”

Who is “they”? Well in this case its the neighbors and relatives that are with them as we see in verse 57.

But I still think it identifies a bit of truth to the reality of the “they” voices in our lives. Why do we often allow They to speak for us and to us? How is it that They knows so much about everything? Are we a bit fearful when They confronts us, apparently knowing more about something than we do?

We often allow “they” to become the louder voice and authority in our lives and on the ways things are supposed to be done and we often end up listening more to “they”, rather than what God wants to speak to us about. The truth that God has for us and how God wants to work and move in our lives.

And here in our passage we see how God is up to something unordinary. God is at work doing the unconventional, the unexpected, making way for the arrival of His son Jesus but “they” are so caught up in this traditional naming that they are missing out on what is actually taking place here. What God is at work doing here.

A barren woman, an angel visitation, a silenced man, a miraculous birth. Isn't it interesting that in the midst of all of these unconventional things, they are all caught up in a conventional traditional naming process?

Aren't we the same way? Don't we do the same thing? We get caught up in what “they” say or we cling to whats comfortable and known and meanwhile we end up missing out and seeing and experiencing how God is at work now, what God is trying to get a hold of us to show us.

“They” are still unconvinced about this name and so they consult Zechariah. And Zechariah, who as you remember can't speak, motions for a writing tablet and writes “His name is John!” Not will be called, but its a done deal... His name is John as that is

what Gabriel said nine months earlier. And apparently Zechariah here has learned his lesson.

And immediately he can speak, he can hear. And what is the first thing he does? Praises God! Breaks out into song. All about Jesus our savior and John his son who will prepare the way, give knowledge of the one who saves us from our sin, who is the light of the world.

*All these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. **66** All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child, John, become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.*

What then will this child become?

The people, "they", are finally beginning to see and realize that there is nothing conventional about this. God is clearly at work here. It would have been tradition for not only this baby to be named after his father but to also follow in his father's footsteps. Go into the family business. Become a priest.

But John will not be a priest in the temple but a prophet in the wilderness, preparing the way for Jesus the light of the world. The one to save us from our sins.

An unconventional name, an unconventional life preparing the world for an unconventional messiah, Jesus.

I really appreciate kids, especially my girls. They truly are gifts from God. Our youngest daughter Penny who is now four, especially keeps me on my toes. Helps me to think and see the world and God's love and grace in exciting and unconventional ways.

She truly is a living example of unconventional. The way she eats (tacos), how she does things, thinks about things, and says things. It helps me, and it pushes me to not just settle for what I know or think to be the only way of doing something.

I know how you all enjoy Penny stories so here is one from this past week that I think illustrates her unconventional nature.

Last week we had just dropped sisters off at school and Penny and I are talking about Christmas and such and Penny says, "Dad, I love you so much"

She goes on to say, "I like bigger Jesus more than baby Jesus." I'm thinking ok.. That's an odd thing to say. Who doesn't like a baby, especially when it's little baby Jesus. So I ask her "Well why is that, why do you like bigger Jesus more than baby Jesus?"

"Bigger Jesus can love me better than baby Jesus. Bigger Jesus loves us and died on the cross."

So then we get to talking about Christmas and excitement for that. And I ask her, "Penny, do you know why we celebrate Christmas and what we are celebrating?"
Silence.

"Ummm.... Can you give me a hint?"

Sure. It has to do with a birthday.

Jesus Birthday? Yes we celebrate Jesus' birthday.

Then she says, "well, how we do dat when he is not even here? Where is he?"
I tell her Jesus is preset with us through the Holy Spirit and He is also in heaven.

"So then we call him on the phone and sing Happy Birthday?" Which is what we do a lot when someone has a birthday in our family.

She goes on to say, "Jesus is in Heaven. Oh yeh, dats right. He is there with Grammy."

Thats right honey.

Then she says, "and he is there with those two naked people.

Naked people? Yeh the ones Morgan showed me. (Why is Morgan showing naked people pictures?) Then I realize what she means. "Oh you mean Adam and Eve. Yeh, Adam and Eve. Why they naked tho? That's weird! Did God make them that way? Yes honey he did.

I know that God gave us a Penny as she helps me to think and get a deeper glimpse of the unconventional, and unconditional love of God in her life, my life and the world around us.

Why does Luke include all these little details all around naming a child. There are more details about this than the first thirty years of John's life.

I think is may possibly have to do with the reality that we have a tendency as people to get caught up in what we know, what we have always done, what we think should be done and in doing so we don't leave a lot of room for God to work in our lives, to see the impossible become possible.

We get stuck in tradition says...The name has to be... The college has to be...The job has to be... The family holiday get together must be...The church must....

And I'm not saying that tradition is wrong. I love our traditions. I love the things that we do that connect us with different generations now and before us.

But when we limit God and when our identity is so wrapped up in what we do or the way we do it, whatever it may be instead of Christ then we end up missing out on the greater glory of God at work in our lives.

What if this Christmas season, we take time to pause and prepare, to make room to be surprised? To see God work in the unconventional? What if this Christmas we don't end our Christmas eve service tomorrow with Joy to the World? Am I kidding? Come tomorrow and find out.

What if this Christmas season we take time to listen, to reflect, to pause and ponder God's grace and provision in your life. To expect the unexpected, and believe the unbelievable, see the impossible made possible.

In *Preparing for Jesus*, Walter Wengarin says this about the birth of John:

"Are we listening? Do we, who are busy preparing for Christmas, parties and presents, and decorations and food and church programs- and visitors- do we prepare with equal fervor for the visitation of the Lord?"

What sort of Advent is this imminent Advent for you? If you are consumed by one more Christmas (one mere Christmas among two thousand) your Advent is fleeting, time-bound, and likely self-absorbed. Desperate preparation often indicates an anxiety about the opinions of others regarding ourselves. But if your participation in this temporal Advent truly signifies preparation for the final Advent, you are Christ-absorbed."

Christ-absorbed. Christ focused. This is what I want to be. Let us be Christ absorbed. Let us know our identity in Christ as beloved children of God.

What is God calling you to let go of? What is holding you back? What is keeping you from experiencing the grace and love, the joy and peace God gives to us through Jesus.

God is constantly at work in unconventional ways, providing through unconventional means. Ways and means that can only be God. It may be unexpected, it may even feel unbelievable and it may definitely be unconventional but His will, His timing, is perfect and complete.

Even in this passage about an unconventional naming we discover God at work, His presence and communicating His grace and love to us.

What's in a name? The name Zechariah means "God remembers", and the name Elizabeth means "My God is an Oath/ a promise" and they give birth to John, which means God is Gracious. Isn't that so cool?

I'll end with this little bit found in Ann Voskamp's , *The Greatest Gift*. She says this about God's grace.

"The era of miracles is here! The miracle is always that God is gracious. You don't have to earn Christmas, you don't have to perform Christmas, you don't have to make Christmas. You can rest in Christ, You can wait with Christ. You can breathe easy in Christ. Open your heart to the miracle of grace. The miracle of Christmas is that you get more than proof of God's existence. You get the experience of God's presence."