

EXPECTATIONS

Okay, I want you all to close your eyes and think back to when you were a kid. You're six, seven, eight years old. Can you picture yourself as a child about that age? Is your mind there?

Now, imagine it's Christmas morning. It's four a.m. and you're wide awake. You're thinking about the Christmas tree in the living room and all the gifts placed around it. And some of those gifts are for you! Can you sense the excitement in your gut? Can you feel the tingle of anticipation running through your body.

Okay, now let me ask, when you were six, seven, eight years old, do you remember a special present—a toy or an article of clothing or something that you really, really, really wanted for Christmas? You wanted it so bad that you wouldn't have even minded if it was the only present you got. Does anyone want to share what that special thing was that you really yearned for.

For me, it was a toy car. But not just any toy car. I wanted a James Bond Astin Martin toy car: an exact replica of the car that Agent 007—played by the best Bond of them all, Sean Connery—drove in the movie *Goldfinger*. This very cool silver Astin Martin toy car had dual machine guns that popped out of the front fender; a doohickey in the back that sprayed oil so the car chasing you would skid off the road; and best of all, it had an ejector seat that sent the villain sitting in the passenger seat flying high in the air.

Man, I wanted one of those Astin Martin toy cars. And I made that very clear to my parents, of course. When a commercial for it came on during the Saturday morning cartoon shows I was watching, I would point it out to them. "Hey, Mom. Yo, Dad. Look! It's that James Bond Astin Martin car I've been bugging you about for the past six weeks. Man, I would really, really love it if you gave me one of those for Christmas!"

Then I would try to lay on the guilt and shame. "I just know all my friends are going to get one. And I would hate for you to be the only parents in the neighborhood—maybe even in the whole city of Portland—who didn't get their son a toy James Bond Astin Martin car with the machine guns and the oil slick doohickey and the ejector seat that sends the bad guys flying."

Can you guess how this story ends?

That's right. I seem to recall getting the board game *Operation*, and a GI Joe with a few accessories, and even some socks and underwear. It wasn't a bad haul when you think about it. My parents didn't deny me. But there was

no James Bond silver Aston Martin toy car with the machine guns and the oil slick doohickey and the ejector seat that sends the bad guys flying.

What's that saying? If you don't expect much, you won't be disappointed. But that's not an easy thing to do. A lot of the fun and excitement of Christmas happens before Christmas. I'm talking about the joyous, hopeful, although often overly optimistic expectation that our wishes have been heard and our desires are going to be met.

In Luke's Gospel, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her, "Mary, you have found favor with God. So guess what? You're going to become pregnant and have a child," I can't help but think that Mary's expectations were anything but joyous or hopeful or optimistic.

Sure, Mary said "Yes" to God. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Mary said "Yes" . . . on the outside. But on the inside . . . she must have been a mental wreck. At times she must have expected the worst. "Lord, what are you asking of me? Giving birth to the Messiah? I'm too young. I'm not even married. And as for having a kid . . . what were you thinking? I don't have any experience as a mother. I'm a total novice. I don't know anything about raising a child.

"And how am I going to explain my out of wedlock pregnancy to my parents? They will be so disappointed. "Then there's Joseph. Poor, dear Joseph. He is going to be so hurt and angry when I tell him. I might as well kiss my engagement to him goodbye. He'll never want to marry me now."

No, Mary's expectations couldn't have been very positive and optimistic. At least at first. But maybe, after a time, Mary's expectations grew more hopeful. I mean, don't all mothers, when they're pregnant, have high hopes and dreams for their child? Every time they feel the baby kick and move around in their womb, they can't help but wonder what their child is going to grow up to be and do. And they desire and yearn for their child to have a good life, and perhaps make the world a little better place because they were born.

I don't know exactly what Mary's expectations for her firstborn son were. But because of the angel Gabriel's announcement, they probably weren't the typical expectations a mother might have. After all, she was going to give birth to the Messiah that Israel had been watching for and anticipating for millennia.

I don't think Jesus grew up and became the kind of son that most mothers—perhaps even Mary—typically expect. Most mothers hope their child has a successful career—maybe as a doctor or a lawyer, or maybe they start their own prosperous business. Jesus was an unemployed, traveling rabbi who was totally dependent on the giving of others for the food he ate and the clothes he wore.

Most mothers pray that their child won't get in trouble with the law and

be imprisoned. Jesus was arrested by the authorities, put on trial, convicted, and executed. Jesus died a criminal's death.

And Jesus was nothing like the kind of Messiah Israel was expecting, either. One of the highest expectations many people had of the Messiah was that he would lead a revolt against the Romans, drive them out of the country, and resurrect the glorious Kingdom of Israel, in the tradition of Israel's greatest, most successful king, David. And we all know how that turned out. Jesus came, not to wage war, but to usher in peace. Jesus the unexpected Messiah came, not to stir up violence against the occupiers of the land God promised His people or support hatred of Gentiles and Samaritans, but to teach that people should turn the other cheek when they're struck, and love their enemies.

Jesus' kind of Messiahship shattered the expectations and dashed the hopes people of many people. I think one of the reasons is their expectations were wrong. They didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah God sent, because they never would have dreamed that the Messiah God sent to them was fated to come into his glory through the cross.

There is one more thing about the Jesus the Messiah that completely contradicted people's expectations. And that is, he came as a servant. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came into the world not to be served, but to serve." The Messiah undercuts our expectations by coming to us, not as a conquering warrior hero and king, but as a humble servant.

Once upon a time there was a man named Walter. Walter was a young man who worked for the largest corporation in the world. The manager told him that he had to start at the bottom and work his way up the ladder to bigger and better things. So Walter began his job working in the mailroom. Walter's boss told him the mailroom job might seem pretty menial, but he was doing an important service for the company. Walter liked his job well enough, but he often daydreamed about being an executive, the president, maybe even the CEO of the company!

One day, as Walter was sorting the mail, he saw a cockroach in the corner of the room. As he walked over to squash it with his foot, he heard a tiny voice cry out, "Wait! Please don't kill me! I'm Milton the cockroach, and if you spare me I will grant you three wishes."

Walter figured he had nothing to lose, so he spared Milton's life and tried out his first wish. "I want out of this mailroom," Walter said. "Make me the vice president of this company." And immediately, Milton the cockroach granted his wish.

Walter was delighted with his high position, but after a time he grew dissatisfied. He decided that he would like to be something even greater than vice president. So he called Milton out of his hiding place and said, "I know

what I want for my second wish. Make me the CEO of this company.”

Milton granted the wish, and immediately Walter became the CEO of the largest company in the world. He had a beautiful office on the top floor of the company building that overlooked the city. He had three secretaries, and everyone who worked there showed him great respect and did whatever he told them to do. And so, Walter was very happy. He often looked in the mirror in the executive bathroom and said to himself, “I’m Walter, and I’m at the top. No one is bigger or more important than me.”

One day, Walter went into the lunch room to find one of his secretaries and tell her to type up a financial report. He walked through the door and saw her sitting at the table, her head bowed and hands folded, praying silently. “Are you praying to me?” Walter asked. “After all, I’m the CEO of the largest company in the world.

“Um, no,” his secretary responded. “I’m praying to God.”

Walter was quite perturbed by what she had said, so he returned to his office and summoned Milton the cockroach once again. “I’m ready for my third and final wish, Milton,” said Walter. “I want to be God.”

And so Milton granted Walter’s wish. The next day Milton was back in the mailroom, serving the company.

And that, my friends, is the way of Jesus.

Who would have ever thought that the Christ, the Son of Man, came not to be served, but to serve.” But that’s the kind of Messiah Jesus is, the kind of Messiah we’re waiting for and expecting this Christmas. A servant Messiah.

And if we want to be Jesus’ followers, he expects us to serve others, too.

May the Holy Spirit empower us to live up to Jesus’ expectations. Amen.