



Christmas Eve expectations

Are we expecting too much from our worship services?

During Advent, I often meditate on the holy family. There's Joseph, the adoptive father whose acceptance of Mary and Jesus is later mirrored in the adoption of the Gentiles into God's original chosen family. I give thanks for Joseph's love, grace and obedience when it came to putting together an unconventional family.

And there's Mary, the God-bearer, the woman who willingly submitted her body to participate in the Word becoming flesh. I'm grateful for her example of strength, as surely she had to endure a few sideways stares and judgmental comments about her unusual conception.

What high expectations these parents must have had for the birth of the God-given child they had been promised. They both knew that they were participating in something so much bigger than themselves. They had been chosen to bring Emmanuel — God with us — into the world.

And yet when Christmas Eve arrives, the worship service I've anticipated never meets my expectations. I sit down on the chancel and notice the empty seats in the pews. I see the bored faces of family members who are there only because worship precedes gift giving.

I wonder what went on in their minds once they got over the shock and the angelic birth announcement. Did Mary daydream about the day her child would be born? Did she assume that such an important child would merit an important birth? Did Joseph imagine claps on the back and respect for his faithfulness? Did they ever anticipate that the Messiah child they'd been promised would be laid in a manger? As Mary panted and moaned through her labor, did she look around at the dirt and stones in disappointment and wonder if it was really supposed to be that way? Did Joseph question if that was

really the way the Son of God was supposed to come into the world? I suspect that Mary and Joseph must have expected more from that night.

In many ways, I feel like Mary may have felt while she waited for that first Christmas. I ponder and pray as I plan the Christmas Eve service. I imagine the huge celebration and thanksgiving that God's incarnation deserves. In my expectant imagination, the sanctuary is full, the music is perfectly on pitch, there are no typos in the bulletin, the sermon is meaningful and there are smiles of joy and friendly claps on the back as we celebrate the birth of our savior.

And yet when Christmas Eve arrives, the worship service I've anticipated never meets my expectations. I sit down on the chancel and notice the empty seats in the pews. I see the bored faces of family members who are there only because worship precedes gift giving. I wince at the typos and I wonder, "Is this the way it's supposed to be?"

Is this the way that we are to celebrate the amazing news of God's great and forgiving love for the world? I feel guilty that in our small Pennsylvania town, the Christmas celebration isn't bigger and grander.

Then, as I settle in to hear volunteers read the familiar story, I'm reminded that yes, this is the way it is supposed to be. I hear about Mary and Joseph going to a small town and not a big city. I'm reminded that they were turned away from a place that could have offered them shelter and hospitality. As I let go of the imagined worship service and settle in to the one that is happening in front of me, I remember that this is exactly how God shows up in the world. God comes to the churches with empty pews and typos in the bulletin. God comes to the churches that can't afford to hire musicians or pay for the repairs to their organs. God even comes to the minister who expects too much.

On that night so long ago, God did not come to meet our expectations, but to change our expectations. God came to show us what love, grace and power look like in the flesh. We gather to celebrate the dirt and the stones and the Word made flesh for our salvation.

Sue Washburn is the pastor of Reunion Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, and a freelance writer.