

We know a young couple who are expecting their first baby. The child isn't born yet, but I already feel sorry for it. It's the first baby, and the first grandchild on each side, so the expectations are high. **That child had better be perfect, or someone is going to be in serious trouble.** The couple had an ultrasound done and know it's a boy. The baby's head is large, as fetus heads tend to be, but this couple believes their child's head is large because he has extra brains. **Big, humongous brains, which will make him smarter than anyone else, so they've started educating him in the womb.** They're not waiting for kindergarten. They're having him listen to classical music, before he's born. Oh, that poor child. **Can you imagine the pressure that kid is under?** He might already have an ulcer.

Incidentally, scientists now tell us fetus's can hear as early as sixteen weeks, and that what babies hear while in the womb can have an effect on them. **I wish I'd known that when Joan was pregnant.** When she was about twenty weeks pregnant with Spencer, I took her to a Three Stooges film fest, which now explains a lot of things.

This couple's expectations are so high, I worry there is no way their child can live up to them.

Sometimes I wonder if that might have been true with Mary and Jesus. Talk about expectations. Think about Mary. Just a kid, really. **Probably 14 or 15 years old and she becomes pregnant.** The angel Gabriel appears to her and tells her all the wonderful things her child will do. **Son of the Most High, heir to the throne of King David, Son of God.** How do you live up to that billing? How can reality ever live up to the expectation?

It didn't for Mary. You read the gospels, in between the lines, and it almost seems that her understanding of who Jesus should be didn't jive with how Jesus turned out. **She never seemed to understand his calling, and he seemed almost indifferent to her.** A parent and child who never really understood one another. It wouldn't be the first time.

When our children are little, we have expectations of what they should do and how they should be. **Then, generally when they get to be teenagers, we realize maybe they aren't going to go the way we'd expected.** Some parents resent it. Fight it. Try to force their child into a mold. Usually done in love, wanting their children to have it a little easier, a little better than they did. **So they try to steer them along the path of their expectations.**

We do the same thing in our marriages. **We have expectations of the ideal marriage and become upset when our spouses don't conform to that ideal.**

Expectation is a two-edged sword. Some people become great because greatness was expected of them. **But just as often, expectations can cause bitterness and resentment, as people are made to feel that who they are and what they are isn't good enough.** Worse yet, because we expect someone or something to be a certain way, we fail to appreciate the beauty and goodness they do possess.

I was listening to a story on NPR this week about Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk and mystic, who lived and wrote at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. **A man named Morgan Atkinson produced a movie about Morton.** While making the movie, Atkinson traveled to Gethsamani to interview people who'd known Merton. Merton died in 1968, so most of his contemporaries are deceased. If he were still living, he'd be 93. But Atkinson interviewed an elderly monk who knew Merton. The monk told how people still came to Gethsamani to see where Merton worked and lived, expecting to have the wonderful epiphanies and supernatural experiences Merton described in his books. **But these people would invariably leave disappointed, because you can't recreate epiphanies and supernatural experiences.** They're like vapor.

Ironically, the Abbey of Gethsamani is a beautiful place. But all those people show up expecting to feel a certain way, and leave disappointed when they don't. **Think how happy they would be if they could forget for a moment what they thought it should be, and just enjoyed what it is.**

This is the downside of expectation—in making us think life should be a certain way, we're often at odds with what life is.

The angel Gabriel gave Mary a glimpse of Jesus's life. **But Gabriel meant one thing, and Mary expected another.** She thought of prestige, so didn't understand the rejection. She thought of power, so didn't understand the gentleness. She thought of wealth, so didn't understand the simplicity. **This seems to have been the pattern of their relationship—Mary expecting one thing, Jesus doing another.**

What do you expect from life? What do you do when life and people don't conform to your expectations?

Our friend Carmella was in the hospital this week. **Carmella is friends with Carolyn Slaughter, so became friends with all of us here at Fairfield.** Carmella has lost her eyesight, so Carolyn brings her to meeting with her.

Carmella was having trouble breathing this past week, was admitted to the hospital, where I went to see her. **I'm sitting by her bedside this past Friday afternoon, holding her hand, talking with her.** A lady walks in the room. Carmella, of course, couldn't see her, but sensed her presence and asked, "Who's there?"

The lady gave her name, then said, "I'm an occupational therapist."

Carmella asked, "What's an occupational therapist?"

I said, "Occupational therapists help you find a new job."

Carmella got this big smile on her face and said, "Oh, good. I want to be a bus driver."

I don't think Carmella expected what life dealt her, but her response to life is inspiring. **We all have expectations.** We want our children to be certain ways and do certain things. We want our spouses to meet our expectations. We want to experience God the way others have. We want others to appreciate our efforts. We have all these expectations. **If we're really, really lucky, a lot of our expectations are met.** But 99% of us aren't real lucky. So then we get to decide how we'll respond when life and people and circumstances don't turn out like we'd hoped. **We can become mad and bitter, and distance ourselves.** Or we can accept and adjust, giving others the room to be who they are, being grateful for the life we have instead of pining for the life we don't.

That's what Mary did. **Jesus probably didn't turn out like she'd thought, her life likely didn't head in the direction she'd hoped.** But Jesus gets to the cross, and she's right beside him.

“Well,” you say, “she's his mother. Of course, she would stay with him.”

But not all mothers do that. And not all fathers. And not all people.

I might be reading too much into this, but I think Mary had this ability to lay aside her notion of what life should be, and accept with faith and courage what life turned out to be.

I hope I can do that. And I hope you can too.