

Have you ever noticed how life never seems to go exactly, or sometimes, even close to what you had planned? Just think about the last 2 years – nothing could have ever prepared us for all that we have been through. We're sitting at the end of 2021 and for all of us this year has simply not turned out the way we expected – we all thought we might have seen things revert back to normal by now but that's just not the case. And so it's natural to look into 2022 with an element of concern.

How do we respond when aspects of life don't go according to plan? There's definitely times in my life where I know I've not handled things maybe as well as I should have.

Let's consider today how Mary dealt with the unexpected. The area that Mary was brought up in was not some big city. It had a small number of families living together, probably the size of Ballynure, therefore you'd expect it to be a tight-knit community. The lives of each other were intertwined – everyone would have known what was going on between families. So put yourself in this scene, and try to remember that no one had any idea of what was about to happen. I know we go through the reiteration every year across our churches, but the reality is that a teenager, betrothed to a young man from Nazareth, whose now pregnant, is going to rock the community.

Mary's just a nobody in her own wee world, but life has just become incredibly complicated. Gabriel has just explained that this son of Mary's will not be the son of any male counterpart, any human being, and any father on the earth. He will be Mary's son. But He will also be the Son of God Himself. So God creates God in human form. It is an explanation not only of the incarnation, in which God becomes man, but fully explains exactly who Jesus is.

But for Mary, I'm sure the glory of what is about to be revealed doesn't stop her being worried sick. And so what in the world are people going to think; what are they going to say; what will happen to her; more than that what will her fiancé' think, will he still marry her, or will He divorce her? And more than that, she has just discovered she is going to be responsible for parenting the literal Son of God Himself.

But in the most unexpected of moments, God has already provided an assurance that Mary is not on her own. Gabriel gives Mary a way to confirm what's really going on here. Gabriel confirms that Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age, and the assurance that nothing is ever impossible for God.

And that folks, in the midst of challenging circumstances, will always be the area of doubt in my view. Do we really believe that God will do something in the uncertainty? That's exactly what we've got to believe when the unexpected, the very perplexing, the incredibly complicated, and even the impossible happens in our lives. That nothing shall be impossible with God."

Mary was a strong faithful girl for her age. She accepted the circumstances. She's effectively declaring that, "No matter what, I entirely surrender everything to God's will and his plan". And that folks is what God wants to hear from us today, no matter

what it is we face, that when the unexpected happens, good or bad, we will humbly surrender to God's plan.

A number of years ago I had the privilege to play alongside an American artist called Sara Groves. In a song she wrote entitled 'He's always been faithful', I was greatly touched by these words 'Morning by morning, I wake up to find the power and comfort of God's hand in mine. Season by season I watch him, amazed in awe of the mystery of his perfect ways. All I have need of, His hand will provide. He's always been faithful to me.' And folks it is so true. Around this church gathering right now will be stories of how, irrespective of the complexities of your life, you are able to tell the story of how God has seen you through.

And that's why Mary was so blessed. She believed God would somehow see her through all the incredible complications and unanswered questions about what was about to take place. The visit to Elizabeth in some ways may have brought relief, when she sees an elderly woman whose now pregnant. She knows, and we can know that in life, nothing is impossible for God, even when everything else seems to have failed.

And so the other thing we learn in this story, is that God will often provide us with a second and third witness of the plan, and so He did so here for Mary, and the second witness, would indeed be Elizabeth. But just to make sure that Mary didn't miss it, the very moment that Elizabeth and her meet, the supernatural and the incredible take place.

The child in Elizabeth's womb, who had been there for six months, jumps for joy. And Elizabeth, if you hadn't noticed is immediately filled with the Spirit and delivers what has to be a prophetic, supernaturally empowered declaration of what has just happened. She has heard nothing of Mary's pregnancy—Mary would not have revealed it to anyone. But immediately, God reveals to Elizabeth what this jumping for joy in her womb is really all about! Verse 42: "In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear". So how else would Elizabeth know this if it wasn't for God speaking into her heart.

And if that's not enough, Elizabeth then declares something that is our last aspect of learning for this morning. Verse 45 – "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Remember that Elizabeth would have known what it meant to not believe. After all her husband, Zacharias, had not believed when Gabriel announced he was about to become the father of John the Baptist, and was unable to speak for nine months on account of his unbelief. There is such blessing that comes from believing. And that's why today you need to know this – 'God will always bring blessing, even in the most unexpected circumstances, when his people are faithfully obedient to him. God wants from us in any and every circumstance in life, to be Faithful and Obedient Servants. Faith that produces obedience.

God will continually look after us. He is our loving God. I do not believe he ever sits distant or absent in a situation. Psalm 46 must sit with us through those unexpected moments of life, that God is an ever-PRESENT help in times of trouble, therefore we

will not fear. That no matter what happens around us, we will not fear, because he is there.

So when we realise that God takes care of us, and we remain obedient and faithful, our response becomes one of thanks. As Mary hears the incredible supernatural words from Elizabeth, her faith and her joy overflows, in the verses after our reading, otherwise known as The Magnificat. Mary is saying this – “What I have believed is true; God is faithful. He is not only hearing my prayers, but the prayers of all Israel for centuries. He is fulfilling His Word to the prophets. He is sending His Saviour, the Messiah, to save His people and me from our sins”.

It's hard to imagine that in the unexpected or difficult chapters of life, that there would be opportunity to show thanks. Maybe in that encounter with the angel, in the dialogue with Elizabeth, Mary was able to see ahead and understand what God would do through this incarnation; that in these unexpected events, in a very unassuming village, to a young girl, probably uneducated and known for very little, would come a saviour, a person who would never call anywhere his home, who would live among people, but who would be a light to the Jews and gentiles, who would step into the mess of life, and by his sacrifice for his love for each and every human being, would bring about salvation for all who would receive the opportunity to be an heir in his Kingdom – that love would break in to every and any situation, expected or unexpected.

Today, do you believe that God can do anything in the midst of the unexpected? Have you invited him to the stuff you're dealing with? Remain close to him. Commit 2022 as a year to trust in him. Believe that He will bless your obedient faith. Even in what might seem absent of any blessing, call on him and seek how blessings may arise.