

# “Expectant” by Leah Fowler

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28

Friday night I was given a challenge. Before that, I was given a gift. It was a white-elephant exchange gift, at our church’s Midpoint Group holiday party. I have a strategy for exchanges like this: I shoot for the smallest present, because that way if I don’t like what I chose (most of these were repackaged gifts, the tackier the better) I know it won’t clutter my home or my life. I picked a small, thin package. Unwrapping it revealed *The Romance Writers’ Phrase Book* by Jean Kent and Candace Shelton: 140 pages of one-line phrases from romance novels on topics from body parts to emotions to sex. An example: “She wrenched herself away from her ridiculous preoccupation with his arresting face.” And, there is an appendix to help you enhance your romance vocabulary: why say he had black hair when you can describe him as having sable curls?

The challenge came when my Midpoint peers told me to use the book to shape my sermon. “It will make you a more lively preacher,” they told me.

Now I did not want to trivialize the Holy Word by making a game out of weaving these phrases into my sermon. I was particularly drawn to the John the Baptist gospel story and I did not want to steal any of his thunder by going off topic. I mean, look at this guy! Mark’s gospel had him “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and eating locusts and wild honey.”<sup>i</sup> This is a man who had something important to tell us and God knows he wanted to be taken seriously. But the more I thought about it, the more I began to see both our Advent readings of the morning through the lens of **desire**: our desire for God, and God’s desire for us.

Think back to a time when you were first dating. Remember the expectation and desire you felt? Remember the shift in the night when you realized you wanted to share a kiss with your date, and sensed that your date desired the same? Even though you could pretty safely assume there would be some kissing during or at the end of the night, your body continued to build up the expectation: sweaty palms, blood rushing to your face, butterflies in your stomach. Physical cues pointed you towards the person of your desire.

Now, we don’t typically think about John the Baptist holding make-out sessions in the wilderness. However, he did hold an expectation and desire that was palpable. A sense of urgency drove him, so much that he took on the words of the prophet, saying ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord!’ He called people to confess their sins and be cleansed in the waters of baptism. He knew he was not the light, not the Messiah, but his deep desire was to point the way towards the light, our Messiah.

If you are on a date with someone and you want to kiss them, but they don’t want to kiss you—or vice versa—the date is pretty much a bust! And throughout biblical history, we see these kinds of misses. From God’s perspective, there is a longing for human connection that God tries to forge through the Torah or law, the prophets, and even some kings. And yet God’s desire is disappointed when God’s people turn from the covenant, ignore the voice of the prophet, and worship other rulers rather than God. Likewise, from the human perspective there is often the desire for a God who

seems elusive. Here is an echo of the Psalmist: “O my God, I cry day by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest.”<sup>1</sup>

But in Advent, we find a sacred time in which there is the chance for an alignment between God’s desire and our desire. The prophet in Isaiah speaks of all the gifts God desires to offer God’s people: good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, comfort to the mourning, a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. In receipt of this offering, the prophet claims, ‘I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.’ Even in the prophet’s language you can see the depth of desire for God’s gift, likened to the expectation and desire felt between a bride and groom before a wedding.

There is so very much in the secular world that tells us Christmas is coming. Most of those messages tell us what we ought to want and what we ought to buy. Lights and music create a spectacle all intended to enhance our desire to spend more money. And in the midst of all that, we dare to sing, “O come Desire of Nations, bind all people in one heart and mind. Bid envy strife and discord cease. Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.” Of all the gifts we might receive this Christmas, of all the comfort food we might consume, can we say that the gift we most desire is the unwrapped presence of God incarnate? Do we find our deepest comfort not in food or nostalgia but in the truth that God is with us, Emmanuel?

Indeed, beginning with Halloween we see the transformation of the secular world to prepare for the Christmas buying season. But what about the transformation of our hearts to prepare for the coming of God? In the gospel we see people entering the Jordan in the spirit of transformation, repenting of sins and receiving the ritual of baptism. It is a personal transformation of the heart. In Isaiah, we see a beautiful vision of transformation not just of hearts, but of the entire social order. Good news to the oppressed and building up what has been torn down. Together the scriptures paint a powerful picture of God transforming, and of the human heart’s desire to be transformed.

Being an expectant mother has taught me something about transformation. My body has grown and changed in ways I never would have imagined—all to make room for someone else to come into the life I share with Chris. And it is a transformation I have desired deeply. Even despite swollen hands and feet, sleepless nights and two trimesters of nausea as my body yields to changing hormones, weight and rearranging of organs, most of the time I am just so happy to be pregnant and excited about this child to come that I could explode. Imagine a God who takes that much delight in our existence, even with the faults that come with our being. Imagine yielding our own lives to allow the space for the transformation God could bring in us and in our world, if we are willing to receive it.

And just as in any covenanted relationship, you must find year after year, day after day, reason to love and fall in love again with your partner. And so we return to Advent year after year. We return to a time, a holy time, when our desire meets God’s. We return to a time when we can prepare space in our lives for transformation—to receive God incarnate, in our lives. And God turns to us with a desire so deep to be with us that it must take on human form. This is the good news. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:6

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 22:2