

"Expect the Unexpected"
Matthew 1:18-25

"Are you ready for Christmas?" I can't count the number of times I've been asked that question during the past couple of weeks. Since the day after tomorrow is Christmas Eve, we had better be ready. Maybe there are a few last minute things to be done, but we're probably as ready as we're going to be.

Families have gathered or are gathering.

Christmas cookies are baked.

Decorations are in place.

Expressions of love are beautifully packaged in an array of color under the tree.

The menu for Christmas dinner is all planned or you know where you are going to eat that day.

Everything is more or less nailed down. Christmas has to be the most carefully planned and orchestrated time of the year although our orchestrations don't always play the tune we want.

It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," her husband replied, "you'll know the day after tomorrow." The next morning, she turned to her husband again and said the same thing, "I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And her husband said, "You'll know tomorrow." On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, "I just dreamed again that you gave me a diamond necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And he smiled back, "You'll know tonight." That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. And when she did, she found a book titled, "The Meaning of Dreams."

Last week I talked about Advent as a season of preparation and waiting. I said that Jesus won't arrive until we are ready to receive him. I don't want to retract that statement, but I would like to modify it. Is it not possible that we can be too ready – so prepared for Christmas, that we miss the element of surprise and, hence, the reality that was born among us?

Every year we sing the words of Isaac Watts -

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room...

Preparing our hearts does not mean filling them up with whatever expectations we have about Jesus and how we might celebrate his birth. Preparing our hearts means emptying them out, clearing away the clutter, so that we can be more open to receive this new thing that the Lord is going to do.ⁱ

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "Reality, in fact, is always something you couldn't have guessed. That's one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It's a religion you couldn't have guessed."

John Buchanan is the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and the editor of the *Christian Century*. He writes in the current issue about an article published in the *Century* in 1951 titled, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." The author, Halford Luccock notes that the song is all about inappropriate and ludicrous gifts. "A partridge in a pear tree? What on earth could one do with that?" He then goes on to extol the wisdom of completely inappropriate and useless gifts. "Give grandma perfume, or dancing slippers, not woolen mittens ... The best gifts of love are those that show a lovely lack of common sense."

Buchanan comments, "The original Christmas gift was certainly impractical – a baby, born in a cow stall. What people wanted was a king like David who would unify the nation, rally the troops, drive out the occupying Romans and reestablish the monarchy. That's what a Messiah is supposed to do – make things right by defeating God's enemies, establish a new order of things based on real power. And so, when the gift was given, nobody much noticed."ⁱⁱ In short, you could say that's why Jesus was rejected instead of accepted – he underwhelmed the world by giving up power and making himself vulnerable. He did not live up to people's expectations.

This morning we heard Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus. Matthew pays more attention to Joseph than does Luke who focuses on Mary. Even so, Joseph, like a lot of men, doesn't have anything to say. Have you ever noticed that Joseph never has any lines in the Christmas Pageant? He doesn't even have a genetic connection with the baby. He is rarely mentioned beyond the birth stories and then, rather obliquely. You may conclude he is more of a sideline character, a movie extra, if you will. Yet I believe Joseph plays a critical role in the story. Joseph shows us how to be open to surprise and not undone by an unexpected turn in events. You might even say that Joe teaches us how to go with the flow without drowning.

Joseph had a plan for his life. Someday he would marry a beautiful young woman named Mary. He had to modify that plan when he learned that she was pregnant and he didn't know by whom, or if not a whom, than how. He didn't go into a rage of anger and run away, leaving Mary to face the music. Quite the contrary. He loved her too much. He didn't want to expose her to public disgrace so he planned to call off the engagement and let her go. True love never clings to the beloved.

Joseph's plans were always trumped by unexpected happenings and a word from the

Lord usually came through a dream. “Don’t be afraid, Joseph, either for Mary or for yourself. Stay with her. She will bear a son and you will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” With no visible signs of any ways and means for this to work out, Joseph woke up from his sleep and obeyed. He and Mary were a lot alike that way. Remember Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel in Luke’s story? **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”**ⁱⁱⁱ

Again, there were no visible signs of ways and means as to how it would all work out. The only sign they had was one given through the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz hundreds of years earlier. Jesus, the Savior, would also be known by another name – *Emmanuel* – which means, “God is with us.” They didn’t have much to go on, but the assurance that God was with them satisfied Mary and Joseph as they began their torturous journey together. Would that such “blessed assurance” satisfied us. We prefer to have life well-planned out and nailed down. We don’t like to leave things to chance which, by God’s grace, when we look back through the eyes of faith, can also be seen as providence.

For some strange reason I “googled” my sermon title and discovered the name of a band I had never heard of – *Control Denied*. That’s an apt name for a band that features a song called, “Expect the Unexpected.” Some of the lyrics are:

And when life seems to be complete
It comes and knocks us off our feet
The element of surprise
The vengeful attack
Straight on your back it will send you
Into a state of deja-vu
Here it comes one more time
Showing its ugly face
Assaulting the senses
Screaming into the mind
Prepare for what you cannot see
Expect the unexpected
And you will save yourself
A state of shock
A waiting game, waiting to see
Expect the unexpected
And you will save yourself
A state of shock

If you expect only what you expect, that is if think you can survive only if everything goes your way, or according to your plan, then when life doesn’t go your way and your plans are frustrated, you’ll probably experience whiplash! You know what they say about trees that don’t bend in the wind – they won’t outlast the storm.

Carl Sandburg once said, “Nearly all the best things that came to me in life have been unexpected, unplanned by me.” I have to agree. I also have to admit that unexpected happenings can bring great pain, suffering and spiritual struggle. But with the unexpected, even more so than with the expected, we are more likely to sense a presence, a presence whose name is *Emmanuel*. Maybe you want something more dramatic, more convincing. That’s a typical human response when the unexpected causes pain. Christ Jesus “*was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*”^{iv}

Power – not in the usual sense of the word which seeks to be in control – but power that comes from knowing we don’t have any real power in ourselves and we don’t need to

be in control; power that comes from trusting and taking our Heavenly Parent by the hand; power that comes from knowing that nothing in life nor in death, no matter how unexpected, can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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- i. See Isaiah 43:19
 - ii. *Christian Century*, December 11, 2007, p. 3
 - iii. Luke 1:38
 - iv. John 1:10-12