



“Jesus Enters In”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Luke 1: 46-56

December 24, 2020

“Expect the unexpected.” Those are the words that Oscar Wilde used to articulate the mentality that displays, in his words, a ‘thoroughly modern intellect.’ I don’t think he’s wrong. I’d also suggest, however, that there are few better phrases to express the heart and truth that abounds in this origin story of our faith – this moment of God coming to us in the form of an infant child.

The truth is that ‘unexpected’ is almost insufficient in articulating the experience of those shepherds that night. Where we just left off with the story – with the shepherds stunned by the awesome sights and sounds of that angelic choir – is an experience that we have to imagine was, in many ways, beyond words. I don’t know how one could describe the thoughts and emotions that must have been overwhelming the shepherds in that moment, but the one thing we can know for sure is that it was anything but expected.

- They’d been hearing of the promised Messiah their entire lives, and their grandparent’s grandparents had spent lifetimes hearing the promises before that. Centuries had gone by – there was no thinking that this was going to happen tonight.
- And not only now, but to them? If the promised Messiah were to be pronounced, it most certainly wasn’t going to be to a bunch of lowly shepherds in the fields.
- And there? Born to her? If anyone was going to carry the Messiah, it wasn’t going to be some unwed girl betrothed to a simple carpenter. And, if the Messiah were to be born anywhere, it would be in a place worthy of his role – not in some filthy stall behind an inn.

The sights, the sounds, the news, the people who heard it, the people involved...there was nothing about this moment that would have been in the wildest fascinations of those shepherds, much less expected, as they looked out upon those coming and going for the census that night. But, then again, that was really the story all along.

- Think back to the promise of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth – a promise made to a couple way beyond their years and a woman who’d been barren her entire life.
- Imagine that moment for Mary as Gabriel laid forth the path that stood before her. The absurdity. The unimaginable consequence. The sheer madness of such a notion.

- Consider the visit to Joseph in that dream that night. Try to picture what it was to hear those words. What his thoughts must have been. What was being asked of him. What it was his God was calling him to sacrifice...to do...to be.

While insufficient in so many ways, ‘expect the unexpected’ seems to be about as good as any phrase could be at expressing the heart and truth that abounds in this origin story of our faith. What really stood out to me coming into this night, this year, however, was that those words seem to be at the heart of not only that night and those people, but everything that followed, everything he did, everything he was, and probably most importantly for us today – everything he still is!

But, for that, let me take a minute to backtrack to earlier on in the story. Prior to this annunciation to the Shepherds, Luke 1 shares that tale of Gabriel visiting Mary that I read a bit ago. It then tells us that Mary rushes off to see Elizabeth, who greets Mary with great delight as the child in her womb leaps with joy. It’s in that moment, then, that Mary voices her own song of praise – one often referred to as the Magnificat – in which she seems to suggest that these early days of the unexpected are but a simple foretaste of that which is still to come.

Listen, if you will, to Mary’s words about the still to be born child of God in her womb.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Do you hear it?

- “He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”
- “He has brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly.”
- “He has filled the hungry...and sent the rich away empty.”

In those days just following that absurd annunciation from Gabriel, and with still no experience of the plethora of unexpected moments that were going to unfold in this birth, Mary seems to already understand that this is a life that is, and always will be, about Jesus unexpectedly entering into one moment of strife and sorrow to the next. And, in all of the story that follows, that is everything we see.

- From the angelic chorus to the humble stable...
- From the embrace of the outcasts to the dinners with sinners...
- From the miraculous healings to the life-altering sermons...
- From his unchanging devotion to God to his unhindered love of God’s children...
- From Pilate’s courts to the foot the cross...

- From the darkness of the tomb to everlasting life for him, and for all...

I could go on all night with these, but Mary seemed to know in that moment what the rest of us learned in the life and death that followed: that expecting the unexpected is at the heart of everything that would unfold, everything that he did, everything that he was, and everything that he still is.

You know, with Julie leading worship this upcoming Sunday, it means that tonight is the last sermon that I will deliver in 2020. I suspect that there are many preachers who are in a similar boat tonight and I have to imagine that I'm not the only one feeling a bit of glee over the fact that I won't need to preach in 2020 anymore. The truth is that none of us are sad to put 2020 in the rearview mirror.

One of the things I find myself doing as I look in that rearview, however, is noting those unexpected places where Jesus entered in.

- Relationships that found new ways of connecting and new life from old redundancies.
- Ministries in the church, both ours and the Church Universal, that have found new forms and forums that will far outlast any temporary circumstance.
- Families who have rediscovered what it means to take time for one another.
- Painful societal truths simmering below the surface that have been brought to light and tackled anew.

There is no denying that 2020 has been a difficult, and in some cases extraordinarily painful, year. There is also no denying, however, that Jesus has entered in. Unexpectedly, into one place of strife or sorrow to the next – in ways both global and very personal – I can look back upon the gauntlet of this past year and see with clarity those places where Jesus was at work...where God was Immanuel (with us)...where Jesus unexpectedly entered in to some of our most fraught moments of such a tumultuous year and guided us to new beginnings of great blessings that will far outlast the temporary realities of the circumstances of now.

I am tremendously glad to be looking at 2020 in the rearview, and I know I'm not alone in that. Even more than that, though, I'm ecstatic to be looking ahead with the blind anticipation of that which God might do next. 'Expect the unexpected,' is what we see at the heart of this Christmas story...it's what we see at the heart of the life, ministry, death and resurrection that followed...and, yes, it's what we see at the heart of Jesus at work in this roller coaster we've known as 2020. So, in 2021, I don't know what's next, and I'm absolutely certain that it won't pan out in the way I expect it will today. But, in looking upon the great 'unexpecteds' of this Christmas story, I am reminded that, in Christ, I can forever expect the unexpected grace and love of God's blessings. And so I'm most excited, this Christmas, not to set aside that which has been, but to claim the hope and wonder of this Christmas story as I set my sights on the unexpected blessings of Immanuel that I expect... that I know... will unexpectedly spring forth in the year to come.