

“EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED”
I: WRONG PARENTS
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Advent I
First sermon in the series, “Expect the Unexpected”

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 1:26-38

Are you a planner? I think perhaps most of us are, judging by the amazing variety of gizmos and gadgets that were hot items in the Black Friday ads the other day. It seemed that every single ad from every single store featured amazing buys on PDAs and GPSs and cell phones and computers! If that is any indication, we must be the most well-planned, well-organized people on the planet!

Face it, we like being in control and having things planned out, don't we? I'll admit it - I like knowing what I'm going to do or what's going to happen - that's why I make lists all the time. At the beginning of each week, I make a list of what I need to do that week, and then, first thing every morning, I make a mini-list of the things I want to accomplish that day. I'm a big list-maker - it helps me stay in control.

How about you? I'll bet a lot of you had lists this week - lists of tasks that needed to be done by Thanksgiving, then a list of everything that had to be done on Thanksgiving, and when it needed to be done, and I bet if we looked in some purses in this room right now, we'd find lists of things that need to be done and items that need to be bought before Christmas.

We like to be in control. We like to be prepared. We like to have things planned out - it makes life go so much more smoothly.

But no matter how much we like it, sometimes things don't go as planned. Sometimes a monkey wrench gets thrown into our plans, and it throws us off.

Recently, I watched a movie again that I had seen some time ago, and in the movie the main characters were thrown a huge curve. The movie was yes, another chick flick - Father of the Bride II. At the beginning of the movie, the main characters Nina and George Banks, had just finished paying off their daughter's wedding from a year earlier, and were settling in to a nice comfortable life. Things were really good. They loved their new son-in-law, he and their daughter lived just

a mile away from them, their young son was doing well, the family business was doing well - all was right with their world.

And then, one day, somewhat unexpectedly, their daughter and son-in-law show up and announce that they're going to have a baby. While it was happy news, it was way earlier than anyone had anticipated, and while the majority of the family rejoiced in the good news, George, the father, played by Steve Martin, was floored by it. He felt like the rug had been pulled out from under him, and when someone called him "Grandpa" for the first time, he flipped out. He wasn't ready for it.

In a classic picture of over-reaction, George goes off the deep end, and goes out and gets his hair died, starts working out at the gym, and sells the family's home. He goes to incredible lengths to fight this interruption in his well-planned life.

Well, old George has no idea what's to come. If he thinks his daughter's pregnancy is an unexpected change in his life, he's about to be knocked completely over. Because just as he seems to get his feet back on the ground from that news, he and Nina find out that they are going to have a baby too! Their baby and their grand baby will be born about the same time! George's reaction to that shocking bit of news? He passes right out in the doctor's office!

Now that's just a cute movie, and it's easy to sit there and watch somebody else twist and turn over something unexpected. It's not so cute when it happens to you, though, is it? Unexpected, unplanned events throw us off course, they pull the rug out from under us, and we're never ready for them.

There are a couple of people in this morning's Gospel lessons who would know exactly what I mean - and their names are Mary and Joseph. Perhaps in all of scripture, they are the absolute classic examples of interrupted lives.

Mary - dear, young, sweet, innocent Mary. A young woman preparing to marry the man her parents picked out for her. A young woman no doubt very happy about their choice - for, from all that she knew about him, he was a good and decent man, a carpenter by trade. No doubt, too, that in this period of betrothal before the marriage, all of the plans were being made for the wedding, the home they would live in together, the future they would share. Like all young women about to be married, surely this time in Mary's life was one of both excitement and nervousness.

I'll bet that, like any other bride, Mary had lists too - and I can guarantee you that, "have a conversation with an angel" was probably not on her list. But one

night, that's exactly what happened. Beautiful young, innocent Mary had a conversation with an angel and the future as Mary knew it was no more. Everything was flipped upside down - everything that one second ago had been sure and secure, was gone. Instead of being a young virgin bride-to-be eagerly anticipating life by Joseph's side, suddenly she was looking at a future as an unmarried, pregnant mother-to-be, possibly scorned and shunned and all alone. It was not what Mary had planned!

And then there was Joseph. He too, had his future all planned out, and it sure looked rosy. How pleased he was with the marriage that had been arranged with young Mary! How pleased he was that they would make a home together and that he would make a good living as a carpenter and they would live happily ever after. Everything was falling into place, and he was well pleased.

Until **his** visit with an angel in the middle of the night - and then too, Joseph's world was thrown into utter chaos. This was the last possible thing he could have imagined! His Mary, his dear Mary, pregnant and not by him! What was he going to do? How could he face people? What would they think of him? What would they think of her? What should he do - stay with her and face the looks and stares of people, and hear their whispers - or do what he had every right to do, even every legal right, which was to call it a day, and break the engagement?

Why, oh why, did this have to happen? Things were going along so well, and now, this, this interruption - it was not at all what he had planned!

Interruptions - unexpected things that come to us when we least expect it, throwing off our best-laid plans. If you've lived any amount of time, you've probably had a taste one time or another of what Mary and Joseph were going through. Now, most assuredly, none of us have had interruptions in our lives the magnitude of Mary's and Joseph's - after all, they were invited to share in the saving of the world - but, most of us have had those moments when something happened to turn our worlds upside down.

Some here had it happen when God called them to do something totally different with their life than they had planned. And some here had it happen when a spouse, or a child, walked away leaving them alone or with a family they never knew they'd have. And some here had it happen when they got a difficult diagnosis from the doctor. And some here had it when they walked into work one day expecting a normal day and an hour later they left the office with no job at all. Some had it happen when the one they loved most of all in life passed away. And some had it happen when a notice came in the mail that all the money was gone and the bills were maxed out. And some had it happen when their body gave out and they couldn't get around like they used to anymore.

If you've lived any time at all, you know a little bit about what Mary and Joseph were going through. What happened to them was totally unexpected and totally unplanned, but this morning I want to invite us to look more closely at their situation, for I believe that, as we do, we will learn much about how we can handle those times when they come into our lives.

The first thing I want to lift up about Mary and Joseph's situation is that it was God's plan for them - and that was made clear to both of them. The God from whom we can always expect the unexpected chose them - who from all outward appearances weren't who anyone expected to be the ones to raise the Savior of the world - who were, if you will, the wrong parents. But while it may not have been what they had counted on, it was clearly what God wanted for them - and after the shock wore off, it was knowing that, that helped Mary and Joseph both say yes to it. No matter what it meant personally for them, they relied on the fact that it was God's will for them as they said yes.

If you ever have an interruption in your life, and you feel in your bones God's nudging in it, go with it - for that is God's will for your life - even if it wasn't what you were planning, go with it.

Mary and Joseph did. They knew it was God's will, so they were willing to face whatever they had to - public ridicule, stares, whispers, whatever - they could handle it because it was clearly God's will, and they knew God would make a way even if they couldn't see it.

The second thing I think we need to remember and in fact, embrace about Mary and Joseph's story is this - the interruptions, the unexpected things, could, in fact, be the best things that ever happen to you. Certainly that was the case with them. They were part of the greatest adventure in all of human history - part of God's ultimate gift of love and care for all of humanity. They were blessed to bear and raise to adulthood God's only begotten Son. That's what came of their interruption, if you will.

You never know, perhaps the thing that most disrupts your life will turn out to be the greatest blessing in it. I know that there are some people in this church who will tell you that the same is true for them too. An illness made them more alive than they ever were before getting sick. A new child in their life opened up places in their heart that were dead before. The loss of a job led to a whole new career and whole new meaning for their life.

Barbara Brown Taylor put it well when she wrote, "When we allow God to be born in us there is no telling, no telling at all, what will come out." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, p. 38).

There is no telling, when we embrace God in the midst of the unexpected, what will come out - it might even be the best thing that ever happens to us.

Finally, and most importantly, what Mary and Joseph knew and what kept them going in the midst of the unexpected was that they knew they were never, ever alone in it - God Himself was with them. Knowing that, they could do what God called them to do - for He was ever by their side and all would yet be well.

So too with you and me. No matter what comes our way, we can handle it for God is with us. We are never alone. We can rest in that word that comes over and over again in scripture, "Do not be afraid."

I'm reminded of the little girl who was so excited because her daddy was going to take her to the movies to see "Snow White." Somebody said to her, "But won't you be scared of the wicked witch?" "No," the little girl replied, "when the witch comes on, I won't look at her. I'll just look at my father." (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 131).

Which is exactly what Mary and Joseph did, and which is exactly what helped them bring about the miracle of our Savior - they looked at their Father, and received strength knowing He was right by their side through it all.

Know too, my friends, that He is right by your side through all the times of your life - the times where your plans go smoothly and all is as you expected, but also, when the rug gets pulled out from under you and the unexpected throws you for a loop. Do not be afraid, for God is with you, and it could turn out to be the greatest blessing in your life.

My friends, the God of Advent is the God of the unexpected. From the earthly parents He chose for His only begotten Son, to the things we will consider over the next few weeks - the place, the witnesses, the baby - through it all, God surprises us.

So, none of us knows exactly what the future holds, but we do know this, the future is in the hands of that same surprising God, and we have no need to fear. That is the Good News of Advent, and indeed, friends, that is the Good News of the Gospel! Thanks be to God.

Amen.