

“EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: WRONG WAY”

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Advent IV

John 1:1-18

I don't know how many of you get to watch or do watch the Today show in the morning. That's usually the one I have on while I'm having breakfast and reading my newspapers. Well, the other day, on Friday, to be exact, something interesting happened. They were talking about a new movie that's coming out starring Jennifer Anniston and Owen Wilson called "Marley and Me." Apparently one of the co-hosts, Meredith Vieira had seen a preview of it, because in a slip of the tongue, she inadvertently told Matt Lauer, Ann Curry and Al Roker how it ended - and apparently it's a surprise ending. I mean, she told them how it ended - before they ever got a chance to see it, before it's even opened in movie theaters! They were more than a little irritated! (NBC, Today Show, Friday, December 19, 2008)

Surprises and endings! Words that describe not only that movie and that event, but also our journey through the season of Advent, which brings us to this place today. Standing on our tiptoes, waiting for Christmas, waiting for the Messiah!

Which is exactly what the people were doing over 2000 years ago! Standing on tiptoes, waiting for the Messiah! They had been waiting a long, long time. For generations, they waited. They read scripture that reminded them of the promise that a Messiah would come to save them. They were told by their parents and grandparents, they heard the religious leaders talk about it! They knew that the Messiah was coming, they were waiting, and oh, were they ever ready!

They were ready to be delivered. They were ready to be free. They were ready to be released from Roman oppression, and to be done with things like the census, which was only another way for them to be taxed. They were ready.

And, frankly, they were ready for the Messiah to come in a big way - a big way - with guns blazing, if you will! They expected the Messiah to come in a blaze of glory, to be a conquering hero, to ride in on a white horse, and save the world! One person said that they were looking for the Messiah to arrive "in the blazing light of the glory of a legion of angels wielding golden swords!"

That's what they were looking for - a military power, a conquering hero, flashing light, thunder rolling, lightning slashing the sky. The Messiah would come and run the Romans out and set things right!

That's what they were looking for . . . and what they got, instead, was a little bitty baby born in a stable and laid in a manger fit for animals. It wasn't at all what they expected, but friends, do you know what? They shouldn't have been surprised!

They really shouldn't have been surprised. Why? Because in the whole history of humankind, when has God not done the unexpected?

A quick trip through Biblical history shows us. When God needed someone to lead His people to the promised land, who did God pick? A man who had it all together, who was eloquent, and strong. No, God picked Moses, who by his own admission was at a loss for words much of the time, and not at all the one God should choose.

And when God needed a King when the people clamored for One, did God choose the biggest, strongest man possible from the biggest, strongest tribe in Israel? No, God chose Saul, from, in fact, the smallest tribe in Israel, and then He chose David, who was deemed so inconsequential by his father that he wasn't invited to meet Samuel who came looking for a king.

When God needed to carry on the line of His people, did God pick a sweet, young woman to take on the task? No, in one of the most surprising moves in all of Hebrew scripture, God chose Sarah - in her nineties!

And when God needed a prophet to proclaim the Word to His people, did God choose some wise, old, seasoned person? No, God chose Jeremiah, a mere youth, whose response was just that, 'I'm only a youth, God' when God tapped him for service.

I could go on and on, but suffice it to say, that God has always done the unexpected, from day one. Yet, we still weren't ready when the Messiah came as a baby. It seems like the wrong way to save the world. So, why did God choose a baby to save the world?

You know, God had tried other ways to care for us. From the very beginning, God tried. First, He put human beings into the perfect place, the absolute perfect place, called Eden. Yet, it wasn't good enough, we humans wanted more, and crossed the line, doing exactly what God told us not to do, and we broke God's heart.

But God tried again, and formed a covenant with His people. It was even established in commandments on tablets. But again, we humans wanted more, and broke that covenant again and again and again. And we broke God's heart again and again and again.

God had to do something to reach out to us in a way we would understand, in a way that would touch us, in a way that would let us know that He understood. And he did that, by coming to us in the flesh, as a human, as a baby.

If God had come to us as a conquering hero, with guns drawn, and military might in a blaze of glory, we could have stayed away . . . but a baby, who can stay away from a baby?

A baby, just like us. A baby, who needs love and care and protection. A baby who will grow up and feel what we feel and do what we do and hurt like we hurt and know joy like we know joy. In that most surprising act, God told us in a beautiful way, "I know who you are, and what your life is like. I know your ups and your downs, I know your joys and your sorrows." In that most surprising act, God erased the distance between us with one fell swoop. He took on human flesh and said "I understand."

It was the most giving thing God could do to save us - for He gave of Himself, in the most vulnerable way possible. He poured Himself out for us in a way that left Him totally at our mercy. That's how much He loved us, and loves us still. He was willing to risk everything to be close to us again.

There was a lot going on in the world of that day. Times were tough, people were suffering, rulers were being oppressive, the future was uncertain. They needed a Messiah, someone to save them, someone to bring life and hope, someone to bring about peace and justice and righteousness, someone to say "It's going to be okay." And the baby born in a manger was that someone - a most surprising someone, a most unexpected someone.

There's a lot going on in our world on this day. Times are tough, people are suffering, there's oppression in many parts of the world, the future is uncertain. The need for life and hope, peace, justice and righteousness is as strong as ever.

In just a few days, we will be reminded again, that we have already received the answer to all those needs, all those yearnings - and His name is Jesus, and we celebrate His coming as a baby, of all things, born in a manger in Bethlehem. Who would have thought it? Oh, we might have, had we remembered that our God is the God of the unexpected, and the God through whom all things are possible.

And my friends, if God can save us through a baby, what is there that God cannot do for us? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. So there is no need for fear, ever. Nothing is impossible with God. Nothing can ultimately harm us, or draw us away from Him. Nothing can take away life, nothing can take away joy, nothing.

I want to close with a quote from one of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor. In a sermon on the nativity, she said this: "Put the old covenant on hold, God says through this Christ-child. I have a new kind of covenant in mind, harder for me but easy for you. From now on, you do not have to come to where I am, however much I would like you to. I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are, to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me - that I will love you the way you are, love you enough to become one of you, and that I love you to death." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, "Decked Out in Flesh," p. 50)

What better news is there for any of us this day - than that God loves you the way you are, loves you enough that He became one of us, and that He loves you to death?" That no matter what you're going through these days, no matter what your joys or your sorrows, your struggles or your victories, no matter what, He loves you and came to earth for you - for you.

My prayer is that as you celebrate His birth in a few days you will rejoice in that, and that you will know life and joy and hope and peace, and celebrate the unexpected ways God has loved you, loves you still, and will love you to the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.