

Expect the Unexpected

Matthew 24

One of the most famous sketches from Monty Python's Flying Circus involves the unexpected. During a sketch, someone exclaims that they "didn't expect a Spanish Inquisition!", often in irritation at being vigorously questioned by another. Then, suddenly, three men jump out dressed in red robes and say, "nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!"

We're full of expectations this time of year. Will the final be what I expected and studied for, or will it be over material it seems I've never seen before? Will I find new toys under the tree, or will I just find socks and an ugly sweater? Will the family all get along, or will old arguments be dredged up again? How will new additions to the family change the dynamics? How will family members who can't make it by death or distance affect the family celebration? What are you expecting for Christmas this year?

All of the Christmas stories are full of unexpected occurrences, things happening against expectations. Angels appear to an old priest, a teenage girl, the girl's fiancée, and shepherds out in the fields. The teenage girl becomes pregnant without knowing her husband, and her relative becomes pregnant in her old age. An angry king, traveling scholars from the east, an emperor's decree all come together to create the story we take for granted. It's a story full of unexpected events for the people in the story.

God didn't do things in the expected way, though. Jesus came in humility, made himself nothing, coming as a baby who couldn't care for himself, but was dependent on his parents. He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He did that by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. The disciples didn't always realize what

Jesus was doing.

Jesus came in a way that no one was expecting, coming as a baby to a humble peasant couple. He came not to overthrow the powers that be through violence, but to show the world a new way, a way of humility and peace. He came to save the whole world, not just the people of Israel. He came to save from sin and death, not from political oppression. He came in an unexpected way. More importantly, what he did is beyond our expectations. The Creator of Everything came to live among us and save us.

But today we hear about Jesus coming again. And this time, it's not just what will happen that we don't expect. It's when it will happen.

For many of us, life is rather predictable. We get into our daily and weekly routines. Most of the time we know what to expect and when to expect it. We plan for changes to our schedules due to things such as doctor appointments and holidays. We like it that way. If we have to change something in our routine, especially at the last minute, it may throw us off-kilter not only for that day, but for the rest of the week. It is easy to become stressed when our schedules suddenly change.

Sometimes the unexpected timing can be a joy. We talk about a mother expecting a child, but no one knows for sure when the baby will come until they do. Even if there's a due date, even if there's a date scheduled for a C section or induction, there's plenty of room and time for the unexpected to occur.

Today Jesus is calling us to prepare for a surprise. With our predictable lives, this sounds hard to do. But it really isn't. Just knowing that Jesus is coming is enough. Christ's return will be joyous. It isn't meant to stress us out. It

gives us hope—hope that one day “swords will be beaten into plowshares” and “all tears will be wiped away.”

A little over 2,000 years ago, people in the occupied territories of Judea and Galilee were not expecting the Son of Man to come among them. Oh, many of the Jews living there under foreign occupation hoped and longed for the coming of the messiah, a victorious warrior and king like David who would throw off the Roman yoke and make Israel again a world power. But no one was looking for the Messiah who actually came, the Son of Man who was born in poverty, taught us to love our enemies and died on a Roman cross.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a special season of the Church Year. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming” or “arrival.” We often think of Advent as a time to prepare for the coming of Christmas. And in a sense, that’s true. During Advent, we do look back in time to the first coming of Christ, when he was born in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. But more than being retrospect, Advent looks forward in time to the Second Coming—or Advent—of Jesus on Judgment Day. Advent is all about getting ready for the coming of Christ on the Last Day (which will be the beginning of all days) when he will set the world right and make all things new.

But while we’re expecting Jesus to come again, we don’t know when that will be. No one knows the day or the hour. Despite all of the attempts to pin down an exact date or time, based on various vagaries of calendars, none of them have been accurate. Jesus didn’t return in the year 1000 AD, or on Y2K. He didn’t return in 2012 when the Aztec calendar reset. He didn’t return during the Great Disappointment in 1844. He didn’t return in September as a pastor on TikTok predicted. We expect that day will come, but we don’t know when it will

come. We only know we’re one day closer than we were yesterday.

If we knew when he was coming, we would know when to get ready. But because we don’t know when, we have to always be ready. We have to always stay awake and alert.

When the prophet Micah names Bethlehem as the place from which salvation will come, our Christian ears hear “birthplace of Jesus.” But if we were in the prophet’s day, we’d likely hear “home of King David.” That’s what Micah’s listeners would have held on to: that out of this tiny village came Israel’s greatest king. And that king himself was a surprise: the youngest and smallest of Jesse’s boys seemed more fit to tend sheep than lead a nation. It’s a reminder that with God the least can become the greatest, and that we should expect the unexpected.

The season of Advent begins on the Sunday closest to today, November 30, which is the day we remember Andrew, the brother of Peter. And he probably couldn’t have expected everything that happened to him. He couldn’t have expected what would happen when he and his brother and James and John are called away from their fishing boats. He couldn’t have expected what would happen when he brings a boy with five loaves and two fish to Jesus as they’re looking out at a crowd of 5000. But Jesus gave him purpose beyond his expectations.

We can’t always know what to expect in life. We don’t know what will happen, or when things will happen. But we know God is in control. We don’t always know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. What a wonderful promise.

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