

DOING THE UNEXPECTED

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto California
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Who would have expected a baby? They expected a hero--a military hero--but they got a baby! God did the unexpected and, the way I see it, God delights in doing the unexpected.

I've been developing a theme this Advent: God responded to the darkness of life by sending a light. Jesus Christ is the light for the world, and through four acts Jesus shined the light; and as we join the Jesus' Light Brigade, we, too, may shine the light in four ways. First, Jesus met human need. Feeding the hungry, responding to the famine in Africa, clothing the naked, visiting the ill are all expressions of Jesus' act of meeting human need. Second, Jesus challenged the systems that oppress people. This was the subject of last week's sermon. Third, Jesus taught his followers a new way of living: ethical challenges that are yet beyond us. I have decided to develop this aspect in a series of sermons beginning January 6, "The Ten Commandments Revisited." Using the basic code of the Ten Commandments, we will ask, "What is Jesus' challenge for ethical living in 1985?" Fourth, Jesus freed people to live their lives by forgiving and encouraging them.

One method God uses to shine the light is "doing the unexpected." It's a fascinating method and I commend it to us as we respond to God in our own lives and let the light shine on others. Do the unexpected.

If you were faced with God's challenge, how would you do it? If you were God and had a world to save, how would you go about it? Humankind has made a mess of the creation. Through free will, humans by and large have chosen to live in defiance of the Creator and the principles of creation. Humans have become greedy, violent, and self-centered, so there is war, poverty, famines, family breakdown, etc. If you were God, what would you do to reach humans, to save the world, to restore creation to its original purpose?

Some 4,000 years ago, God chose a people to shine the light, to exemplify his will, to embody his purposes, to express his love to humankind. If I were to choose a people, I would consider mighty Egypt of that time, or China which had a superior culture and civilization. I would certainly choose a people who had a home, and something going for them. But, not God. God does the unexpected. God chose a band of nomads, uprooted them from the city of Ur, and sent them into Canaan. Abraham was dispatched and told to father a people. Someone has said, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." They had no country, no riches, no oracles of wisdom, no prestige, no status, no history. Perhaps that is why God chose them, and why God still chooses the weak, the humble, the inadequate, those whom the world rejects.

When the people God chose proved to be less than adequate for the task, God embodied the yearning, longing into one person. The Jews longed for centuries for the hero, a Messiah, to lead them out of bondage into victory. To free them from the Roman Empire, to restore the government to them, to rid their beloved land of the foreign army and governors, they expected a military hero. They expected a Messiah accompanied with chariots, soldiers, might and power. They got a baby, a vulnerable, helpless baby, a baby who when he grew up would have nothing to do with military methods. God did the unexpected and came as a baby.

People today are still dissatisfied with God's methods. Many today still want him to come in the clouds, with trumpets blowing, fighting the enemy at the Battle of Armageddon, shedding blood, sending tribulations of terrible proportions on those with whom they disagree. They still misread the unexpected methods of God. God came as a

baby, a little child, surrounded not by wealth, military might or the power of the world, but surrounded by wonder, mystery, music, adoration, and a mother's love. Was God saying to the world: the way to be saved is to wonder, adore, love?

God constantly is doing the unexpected. We humans prefer to have an orderly universe. We like to have our lives predictable. We want structure, order, protocol, and security. We are amused by the traditional Japanese sense of order, where a Japanese knew exactly how low to bow, and how many times to bow, depending on one's position. There is security in such a system. We are amused, but something in us desires that kind of order and structure. But, God allows us to go only so far with order. God allows us to be secure only to a degree, lest we become overconfident, arrogant, complacent and comfortable. Have you noticed that when a church gets comfortable, complacent and orderly, it begins to die; so something unexpected happens, something disruptive. Have you noticed that when you begin to get comfortable, begin to get your life in order the way you want, something happens. It's as if somebody gets nervous and gives you a whammy! So you will live by faith, not by your own doing.

God breaks in on history, as he did at Christmas, unexpectedly. God breaks into your life unexpectedly. Wear the glasses of faith so you can see the God-event in your life. Don't miss. Be alert. Who knows how many visits by God have been missed because you weren't alert? Late one Christmas Day a family in Hillsborough set out to sing carols for the neighbors. At their first stop, the woman of the house came to the door, looking distraught. "Look," she said, "I'm just too busy. The plumbing's on the blink and there's a mob coming for dinner. If you really feel like singing carols, come back later, okay?" "Yes, Ma'am," replied Bing Crosby respectfully, as he herded his troupe elsewhere. Imagine what the lady missed--what she could tell her grandchildren for years about Bing Crosby singing at her house--because she was too busy for the unexpected, and too preoccupied to recognize him. Be alert and open.

A 14-year-old boy gave a talk before 450 people at his school. He was applauded enthusiastically, even approached for his autograph, and so went home giddy with happiness and accomplishment, walking on clouds. He rushed into the house, but before he could speak, his mother chewed him out for not making his bed that morning. "But, Mom," the boy pleaded. "Let me tell you what happened to me today." "I know already," she complained, "You got caught smoking, right?" His great day evaporated like mist. Poof! A great opportunity for family celebration was lost because of insensitivity. She was preoccupied with her own agenda. No doubt the mother had had a difficult day. She was probably tired, irritable, and resentful, but she missed the unexpected. Be alert. Listen to what people are saying. Be open to what people are doing. Watch for the unexpected. Recognize it when it happens.

I wonder how many lodgers in the Bethlehem inn that night complained to the manager, "Hey, keep that kid quiet! What's all the commotion? I've traveled a long way to get here and I'm tired. What's this with all these shepherds and Persian foreigners!". How many missed the event? I wonder how many lodgers went out to the manger and got involved. I wonder how many offered to help Mary deliver her baby. I wonder how many helped bathe him, change his swaddling cloths, burp him, hold him, sing "Tu-ra-lu-ra" to him. I wonder how many missed the "unexpected event of their lives" because they weren't open to it.

This Christmas, let the light of Jesus shine; encourage someone to live his/her life freely, openly, lovingly. How? Do the unexpected. What surprises can you arrange for someone this Christmas? What can you do that will be unexpected and might be an occasion for God to bless someone's life? Pick out someone lonely and befriend him/her. Or, if you are lonely, if you will be alone this Christmas, do the unexpected and reach out to someone else who is alone. Invite him/her to dinner or to coffee and cookies.

Give, share. Take a risk. Like a little child, let the wonder and mystery of Christmas touch the child in you. Be adventuresome. Dream. Fantasize. Let God use you.

What do people around you need this Christmas in order for them to grow? Do they need a word of forgiveness from you, a word of reconciliation? Have you been holding a grudge too long? Is someone upset with you! Get it worked out. Do the unexpected, reach out and touch someone.

Perhaps someone needs a word of encouragement from you in order to grow spiritually. It's not so much what you do for someone that is helpful, as what you can do to encourage them to live their lives, to take their lives as they find them, accept the responsibility and challenge. Don't encourage people in their self-pity, or helplessness, or dependence, or inadequacy; but encourage their self-confidence, encourage their belief in their abilities and skills, encourage their trust in God who, unexpectedly, will sustain, lead and comfort.

Make Christmas extra special this year. Be on the alert for the unexpected in your life. Receive and give thanks. And, do something unexpected for someone else. What will it be?

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