

The Unexpected

Isaiah 11:1-9

Luke 1:39-56

This year, as I told you last week, we're looking at Advent through slightly different eyes, reading the birth narrative as it appears in Luke, without dodging and darting as the Lectionary would normally have us doing. It's away of addressing the fact that the world has already moved into Christmas preparations, and that if we don't make these changes, we never really get to hear the story – until Christmas Eve, if circumstances allow us to be here. Nor do we reflect on all of the elements of the story, under our usual circumstances.

So here we are ... Mary has heard the startling news from God's messenger, and even more surprising, has heard that her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who is well beyond childbearing years is also going to have a child.

Not surprisingly, the first thing Mary does is travel off to see Elizabeth. Who else would be better able to understand all the feelings mixed up inside of Mary, than this kinswoman whose life has also been turned upside down?

Luke has a reason for telling us these two stories side by side. He alone tells us them this way. He alone is calling us to attention, to the reality that God does not act as we expect God to act, that life is filled with the unexpected, and that God is the author of the most unexpected aspects of all.

This month's Observer has an article titled "What If Jesus Were Born Today" Just the title is an invitation to us to realise that the story which we hold dear, and is so familiar to most of us, probably would be very different if it happened in today's world. It also

summons us, along with Luke's account, to recognise that the coming of the Messiah, as heralded by Luke, is as unexpected an event as it could possibly be.

We heard the words of Isaiah, telling us what the coming of this promised one would herald. But it isn't what we see happening in the Gospel According to Luke. Nothing there is exactly as predicted. And that's what the challenge to us is today: to expect the unexpected, to recognise that the coming of the Messiah will not be as we have come to enjoy hearing, as it was in Luke's account. Nor will it be as it was in Matthew's account. God comes to us in unexpected ways.

There is an immediacy in these passages for us. Our world is changing rapidly. It is hard for us to keep pace. But there is still a need for a source of comfort and hope, and the promise of peace. During this Advent season this passage helps to remind us that this season is not simply one of preparing for Santa Claus, or even of simply getting ready to sing Christmas carols, especially since we've broken through that ban and barrier. We too await the coming of a leader who will bring comfort, encouragements, and peace.

Now, as then, the coming will be not less unexpected. It seems that God always catches us unaware. We think that we are open to the mysteries of God, but over and over again we are taken by surprise.

That's the element that Luke holds out to us in today's passage – the unexpectedness of how God works. Who would expect that the Messiah, the deliverer, would be born to a poor, humble teenager? Who would believe that an elderly woman, well past menopause would bear a son whose mission was to usher in the new age, preparing the

way for the Christ? These developments could hardly be more unexpected. Our familiarity dulls some of the unexpectedness – but it is there if we are truly open to hearing the message in a new way.

That's the challenge of Advent, not only for those who preach, but also for those who listen: to catch once again the sheer audacity of the whole story. It isn't a likely story. It's become the basis for so many other tales and myths: the idea that the poor, but honourable will find a way to serve that brings about the triumph of good over evil. It appeals to a longing deep within us – to believe that God does indeed use ordinary people, people who are just like us, people who get frightened and lonely, who get excited and bewildered, people who wonder what it's all about, or even if it is all worth it, but who respond to the invitation or challenge even though it frightens them almost as much as it excites them, people who make mistakes but still ultimately find their way.

Mary and Elizabeth weren't extraordinary individuals. If we try to make them into unusual people then we do Luke a disservice. The whole point of this story is the unexpectedness of it. That's the whole point about the Christ as well. He is unexpected in every way.

That's part of the tension that we live with: we expect the Christ to come as the baby in Bethlehem, even though we know that his coming will be in a way we cannot imagine or anticipate. We celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace, even as we recognise that we do not know what that means in today's world.

Luke summons us to keep our sense of wonder, to recognise, even as we read the familiar words of a familiar story, that God comes to us in unexpected ways. The story assures us that God comes. It does not predict exactly how God comes. God intervenes in the

unexpected: in a child's laughter and delight in simple pleasures, in surprise visits of dear friends, in a quiet moment when peace steals into our hearts, in a candle's glow, in laughter that surprises us in moments of grief, in joy that slips into our lives and delights us.

Our lives are full of unexpected pleasures; moments that are beyond measure. These are the times when we come closest to understanding how the Christ comes to us, and how the Christ will come to us. Every experience that warms our hearts and minds, or stretches us in our understanding, every moment that draws us closer to one another is an unexpected Advent of our God.

Whether we are living in exile, as the people Isaiah addresses, or sorrowing for what can no longer be, or are actively seeking ways to come closer to God, we are still caught unaware by the many ways that the Christ comes to us. Only slowly do we learn to recognise the signs of God's activity in our lives. Only then do we truly begin to understand how very unexpectedly God comes to us, not only at Christmas, but throughout the entire year. Thanks be to God. Amen.