

God is more than we expect

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 18, 2016

Fourth Sunday in Advent (year A): Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV): *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, and Christmas is one week away! As school winds down and decorations are up and plans are made, we are full of expectations about what Christmas will bring. Sometimes Christmas is just as we expect it—the food and music and presents and laughter. On the other hand, sometimes our expectations are let down at Christmas. We don't quite get what we expect under the tree or with our family or in ourselves.

And sometimes—sometimes, we get far *more* than we expect! Sometimes a gift is so generous or a conversation so joyful, or a connection with loved ones so profound that we are changed at a deep level. Sometimes at Christmas, God brings us more than we expect, and joy we don't anticipate. What do you expect? What are you prepared to receive this Christmas?

In today's Gospel reading, Mary and Joseph receive news they did not expect. Mary is pregnant beyond her expectations since she is a virgin. In this situation, Joseph knows what to expect. He and his fiancée could be scandalized in the public eye. But God is more than we expect, and he is doing more than Mary and Joseph could expect.

An angel tells Joseph in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. The angel tells him that the child in Mary's womb is from the Holy Spirit. He will save his people from their sins. He will be Emmanuel—God with us. When God is at work, he is often doing far more than we can ask or imagine. God is more than we expect. This was not what Mary and Joseph expected. This was far more than they expected—far more than they had prepared to receive. When they embraced God's call and followed in obedience to him, God changed their lives and changed the world.

So who was Jesus? Who is Jesus? What makes Jesus' birth and his presence so powerful? How does Jesus change lives today?

There are some small and subtle things that we learn about Jesus in this Gospel reading, things that we might normally overlook. But Jesus is more than we expect. He is the Messiah. He is the savior. He is God with us.

It seems routine to us to hear it today, but this passage starts by saying “the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” That seems sort of normal. Some translations read “the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” The word “Christ” comes from the Greek word that means “the anointed one.” The Hebrew word “Messiah” means “the anointed one.” Though there were many uses for anointing, the most significant use of this term as a title is for the king of Israel. Kings in Israel were not made by putting crowns on their heads, they were made by anointing them—pouring oil on their heads as a sign of God’s favor.

To the Jews living for centuries under Greek and then Roman oppression, “The Messiah” was the one promised by the prophets to set Israel free. They expected the Messiah to conquer the Romans and bring power and prestige to the nation again. But Jesus is more than we expect, and more than the people were prepared to receive.

Jesus is the Messiah, but he is more than a military hero or political ruler. Jesus is the king in the kingdom of heaven, and the bounds of his rule stretch far beyond the borders of Israel. He came to this world as a humble peasant child, but his power is greater than human armies. Jesus does not look like an earthly king, but his power endures while the world’s powers rise and fall.

Jesus Christ conquered the Roman Empire, its pagan culture and its system of slavery. Closer to our day, the power of God at work in one humble man in a tiny city-state helped to bring down the iron curtain and roll back the forces of communism. While the great powers of the Cold War took the headlines in the 1980s, Pope John Paul II worked patiently to undermine the inhuman system that oppressed his native Poland and their neighbors in Eastern Europe. What looks bleak to us may hide the power of God moving mountains. I wonder if we expect Jesus to be greater than the political powers in our day—powers either at home or abroad? God is more than we expect.

Jesus is the Messiah, the king. Jesus is also, as the angel tells Joseph, “the one who will save his people from their sins.” This is the meaning of the name “Jesus.” It is a variation of the name “Joshua,” meaning “the Lord saves.” Here, the angel gives us more insight into Jesus’ power and the kind of messiah he will be. Jesus is the one foretold by the prophet, the one who is Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

Though we avoid thinking about it, our own failures and problems eventually grab hold of us like weights on our feet. We become aware of our own brokenness and the trouble in others as well. Frustrated by our limitations, we can feel so isolated. We often give up on ourselves and give up on others.

Can we expect more in our lives? On our own, perhaps not. This seems to be part of the human condition. But Jesus is more than we expect. Jesus is the one who saves us from our sins and empowers us for repentance and renewal in life. Jesus is God with us, who gives us the Holy Spirit for a life that is more than we expect.

Sometimes this change comes all of a sudden. In our Alpha course this fall, we heard stories from men who were in prison from a life consumed by violence and hatred. And yet, God broke them open and they embraced God's grace that was more than they could ever have expected.

Often, however, God's grace works in slow and deliberate ways, often unseen at first, but powerful and durable.

I have known many people who were frozen and paralyzed by illness and broken by grief and loss. They could not expect a life of joy anymore. They did not really know how to function in their troubles and their sadness. But like a stroke victim slowly regaining speech and movement, each day brought them closer to healing and wholeness. Like a stroke victim or a recovering addict, no one day would turn around all their troubles. But Jesus, God-with-us, is more than we expect. Slowly, one day at a time, God heals us and restores us. God shows us that sin and grief and loss do not have the last word. God shows us that he is more than we expect.

There is a priest I know in the diocese of Pennsylvania who seems always aware of God's ability to exceed what we expect in people's lives. She and I worked together in parish ministry, and from time to time we would encounter some difficult people. Churches have them just like families and schools and neighborhoods. Folks who get stuck in drama or bitterness or patterns of disruption that cause trouble for themselves and the people around them. Most people, myself included, would lose patience with these folks. But my friend Hillary has a way of approaching them grounded in prayer and the grace of God. She has a way of holding healthy boundaries while in great love and compassion encouraging them to find a better way, to embrace a better solution.

Now, people didn't completely change overnight, but God's grace at work in and through her began to pull away the scales of hurt and bad habits of the soul that crowd out health and peace. Because Hillary could see God at work in them, they were able to see God's grace at work in themselves, in ways they couldn't expect. God's grace in Hillary was healing for her as well—and healing for me and others around her.

This is the power of Jesus Christ. This is the power of a child who is more than we expect—the king who conquers the powers of the world, the one who saves us from our sins—the one who is God with us.

In these final days of Advent, prepare to receive more than you expect from God. Prepare to experience God's grace to you in bold ways or in quiet ways that build over time. Look for God's

power at work in you—in your grief or in your joy. Prepare to discover God’s grace in those around you—in your loved ones and in those who trouble you too.

And now, glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus our Lord.