

“THE THINGS OF CHRISTMAS: I – CHRISTMAS WRAP”

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Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-7

For the past year or so, Facebook and other modes of social media, have been a source of stress for a lot of people – mostly because of the presidential election. But now, thanks be to God, the tide seems to be turning a little bit. And this week, it’s gotten a whole lot better because this week, Facebook has been filled with happy and even inspiring things. Pictures of families celebrating Thanksgiving together, playing games together, pictures of adorable babies celebrating their first Thanksgivings, and lots of quotes and posts about the things for which people are grateful this year.

And there’s something else that always appears on social media around the holidays. It’s those appearances of military moms and dads who come home unannounced and totally surprise their families. There were lots of those kinds of posts this week.

One was of a child opening this great big wrapped present only to find his military dad hiding in there. He squealed with joy when he saw his dad, and it was a wonderful tearful reunion.

Another was of a mom who was leaving her office after work one day and passed by a park bench. Sitting on the bench was a man reading a newspaper which concealed his identity. She walked right by, but something struck her, and she turned around, and lo and behold, it was her military son, home from deployment hiding behind that paper. Again, she squealed with joy and jumped into his arms, hugging him as if her life depended on it. Totally unexpected – totally wonderful.

Well, my friends, as we kick off a new Christian year, and begin the season of Advent, we too discover something totally unexpected and totally wonderful. Before we talk about what it is, however, we have to set the stage.

And setting the stage means going back to the beginning of our story. And I mean, the very beginning – back to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. You all know the story – God created this perfect world and then gave life to human beings – Adam and Eve. He told Adam and Eve that this beautiful world was for them, and that they had dominion over it, except for one thing, one tree. “Stay away from that one thing,” God said, and so, of course, they didn’t, and thus began the saga of human sin and disobedience.

Though God punished them for their disobedience, still he poured grace upon them, and the story continued. And the story continued for centuries, and sadly, the story continued in a similar fashion – God pouring out love and grace, humanity turning its back on God and doing whatever we wanted. That’s basically the story of the Hebrew scriptures in a nutshell. God loving and humanity turning away from that love over and over again.

All the while, in those same scriptures, we hear news of someone coming – a Messiah, a Savior, someone who will conquer evil, someone who will set the world straight, someone we heard Isaiah describe this morning – “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Someone who will bring forth justice and righteousness – a conquering hero!

That’s the one people were expecting – a conquering hero, a mighty warrior, a man of power who would rid the world of evil, who would set things right! That’s who they were expecting.

Instead, God sent a baby “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” A baby! Imagine that! Imagine a Savior “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” Totally unexpected.

Poet Ann Weems has written about it in a poem entitled “Unexpected” that goes like this:

“Even now we simply do not expect to find a deity in a stable.
Somehow the setting is all wrong:
 The swaddling clothes too common for the likes of a Savior,
 The straw inelegant,
 The animals, reeking and noisy,
 The whole scene too ordinary for our taste.
And the cast of characters is not better.
With the possible exception of the kings,
 Who among them is fit for this night?
 The shepherds? Certainly too crude,
 The carpenter too rough,
 The girl too young.
And the baby!
Whoever expected a baby?
Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless child?
Had the Messiah arrived in the blazing light of the glory of a legion of angels
 wielding golden swords, the whole world could have been conquered for
 Christ right then and there, and we in the church – to say nothing of the
 world! – wouldn’t have so much trouble today.
Even now we simply do not expect to face the world armed with love.”

(Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 45)

The world did not expect the Savior to come as a baby – a tiny, vulnerable, helpless baby – yet he did – that’s how God chose to send him. Why is that? That’s what I’d like us to think about together this morning.

Clearly, the ways God had chosen to reveal himself to the people hadn’t changed their hearts. So perhaps it was that God decided the only way for us to get it, if you will, was to become like one of us.

Do you ever remember hearing Soren Kierkegaard's story about the prince who fell in love with a maiden from his kingdom? But he was afraid to go to her as the prince. He thought if he appeared with all the symbols of majesty, she would be awed and left with no real choice but to marry him. He didn't want her awe. He wanted her love. And so, he took off his princely garments and put on the clothes of a peasant. Then, he went to the market place where she worked, got to know her, and wooed her. He went to her as one of her own kind, won her affection, and only then revealed to her who he really was.

Tony Campolo, who recounted that story, concluded that "There is no doubt that the God who loves us took on our nature and became one of us in order to communicate with us. Who could withstand the glory of the Almighty? God had to empty himself of that and take on the form of a human being. It was through this equal human being that the fullness of God was revealed to us. And now we know him." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, "What We Overhear About Jesus," p. 15.

And know him we do, indeed. For he became one of us, he grew up like one of us, he was nurtured at the knees of human parents, he worked in a carpentry shop like any other apprentice, he knew joy like we do, and he knew pain like we do as well. He became one of us, God sent him as one of us, so that we might know the depth of his love for us, and how much he wanted us to know him.

Far different from sending a conquering warrior, is it not? Far more loving, far more grace-filled. Or in the words of Ellsworth Kalas – "Christmas shows us that no part of life is unimportant to God, and that none of it is beyond God's interest. And, if that be so, not one of us is beyond God's care and concern. The Christmas story dramatically reveals that God is not a far distant, unapproachable object of worship, but one who chose to come into our world and live in our midst – and to do so in the most ordinary of circumstances." (Ellsworth Kalas, *Christmas From the Backside*, p. 29)

And the unexpected way in which Jesus the Savior entered the world seemed to be only a precursor for the unexpected ways he would work in the world. For certainly in his earthly ministry, Jesus rarely did what people expected. Instead of following rules to the letter of the law, he broke them in favor of grace. Instead of bowing to the people society deemed worthy, Jesus instead reached out to the "others" – the unloved, the unclean, the sinners. Instead of striking back when someone hurt him, Jesus turned the other cheek and bid us to do the same. Jesus, always doing the unexpected – which of course, would cost him his life.

In a beautiful book entitled *Christmas Stories*, pastor and writer Max Lucado reflects on that, writing about Mary looking upon the baby Jesus in the manger. Listen to his words:

"He looks like anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent upon Mary for his well-being.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter.

And so Mary prays (Lucado writes):

‘Sleep well. Bask in the coolness of this night bright with diamonds. Sleep well, for the heat of anger simmers nearby.. Enjoy the silence of the crib, for the noise of confusions rumbles in your future. Savor the sweet safety of my arms, for a day is soon coming when I cannot protect you.

Rest well, tiny hands. For though you belong to a king, you will touch no satin, no gold. You will grasp no pen, guide no brush. No, your tiny hands are reserved for works more precious: to touch a leper’s open wound, to wipe a widow’s weary tear, to claw the ground of Gethsemane. Your hands, so tender, so white – clutched tonight in an infant’s fist. They aren’t destined to hold a scepter, nor wave from a palace balcony. They are reserved instead for a Roman spike that will staple them to a Roman cross.

Sleep deeply, tiny eyes. Sleep while you can. For soon the blurriness will clear, and you will see the mess we have made of your world.

Lay still, tiny mouth. Lay still mouth from which eternity will speak. Tiny tongue that will soon summon the dead, that will define grace, that will silence our foolishness.

Tiny feet cupped in the palm of my hand, rest. For many difficult steps lie ahead for you. Rest, tiny feet. Rest today so that tomorrow you might walk with power. Rest. For millions will follow in your steps.

And little heart . . . holy heart . . . pumping the blood of life through the universe. How many times will we break you? You’ll be torn by the thorns of our accusations. You’ll be ravaged by the cancer of our sin. You’ll be crushed under the weight of your own sorrow. And you’ll be pierced by the spear of our rejection.

Yet in that piercing, in that ultimate ripping of muscle and membrane, in that final rush of blood and water, you will find rest. Your hands will be freed, your eyes will see justice, your lips will smile, and your feet will carry you home.

And there you’ll rest again – this time in the embrace of your Father.”

(Max Lucado, Christmas Stories, p. 255)

Oh friends, in the unexpected entry of Messiah in a manger, also lies the shadow of the cross, which, once again, brings us the unexpected victory none of us deserve, but which is God’s greatest gift to us all.

Finally, let me suggest that, knowing how God acted unexpectedly in sending Messiah, perhaps should lead us to continually look for God in our midst today in unexpected ways. Writer Ellsworth Kalas again invites us to do that when he says, “God is not to be shut off in a corner of life – not even an ornately sacred corner; God chooses to be present in any and every scene with no reluctance to enter our common life.” (Kalas, *ibid.*)

Which may explain why some of you perhaps saw God this week in an unexpected way when you gave away the gift card from the church. Some of you saw it in the tears in

the eyes of your co-worker who was so touched by the gift – a co-worker who touches your life in a special way. Some saw it in the eyes of a police officer or a paramedic, or a garbage collector – gratefulness for the recognition from people who make our lives better every day – surely gifts from God. And some saw it in the eyes of neighbors, who go the extra mile or sit on a bridge and wave at passersby, God’s messengers for sure.

Friends, may you and I always remember that the God who chose to send his only begotten Son into our world wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, the God who over and over again forgives us and sets us free to begin again, the God whose Son loved in unexpected ways and expects us to do the same, is the God who is still at work in our world doing amazing and unexpected things through amazing and unexpected people. As we begin this new Christian year and start our journey through Advent, may our eyes be wide open to see the ways that God is still at work in the world. And may we follow in the footsteps of our Savior, living and loving in such unexpected and loving ways, that those around us will experience his love for them as well. May it be so.

Amen.