

“Expect the Unexpected”

1 Advent A – November 28, 2004

Matthew 24: 36-44

Christ Lutheran Church

Menomonie, Wisconsin

class=Section2>

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Grace and Peace to you from our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What a promise Jesus makes in the verse immediately preceding our gospel today: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” It’s odd that that verse is missing from our gospel today because it contains the set up, the subject of this gospel: on some day, unspecified, the Lord is coming, the Son of Man, another name for Jesus, is coming at an unexpected hour.

In other words, the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel tells us to expect the unexpected. And even more amazingly, Jesus himself does not know! Only God the Father knows -- and he’s not telling. How unexpected!

Is the point to confuse or frighten us? No. Jesus is very clear, because you cannot know the time or the place that the Son of Man will come to judge the world and its people. So you must be ready. Ready every minute of every day, because Judgment has begun.

The clock is ticking and you can’t take your heart and your mind off Jesus for a moment. Because that may be the moment he comes. Perhaps it will be the moment we walk out of church this morning. Will you be ready? Are you living in expectation of the unexpected Jesus?

You know the first part of our worship on Passion Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, celebrates Palm Sunday entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. And as long as I’ve been at Christ Lutheran, that service has always begun with Jake Bostrom singing “The King is Coming”.

But you know, Jake could just as well be singing a song called “Expect the Unexpected” Because the unexpected is exactly what happened -- even the entrance itself was unexpected, both in its timing and appearance. Who would expect the king of the Jews to ride a donkey? Should the king be on a beautiful and powerful stallion? Who could expect that the glorious entry into Jerusalem, full of praise and song and celebration, would in a few short days, end in shame, agony, and a criminal’s execution outside the same city walls he had just processed through? The King is Coming? The king is dying. Or is he? At the end of Good Friday, who would dare to expect some even more radically unexpected?

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we hear the words of Jesus as he speaks after the entry into Jerusalem

and just days before the Passover and the Passion. Why not start at the beginning of Matthew? Why start a story almost at the end?

Because the end of the story IS the beginning of the story. The end of the story of Jesus Christ is the beginning of hope for us now. And the beginning of the hope we receive in Jesus Christ is fulfilled in Jesus when he comes again. And the fact that we don't know when or where or how that coming of the King will be, except that it will be unexpected, is what makes it hope and not just another piece of knowledge.

Advent means "coming". All of the hymns and songs we sing in the next four weeks will proclaim the coming of the King, the Messiah, the Son of God, Immanuel which means God with us. We've heard the story before. We believe it really happened. And so we expect it. There will be a Christmas Day this year because there was one 2004 years ago.

So we countdown the days to Christmas.

We hear about Santa leaving the North Pole and being tracked, I suppose by satellite today, in my day it was North American Air Defense Command, the same guys who would track incoming Soviet ballistic missiles.

All of which is part of our way of saying, our expectations, what we expect to happen will happen. No room for the unexpected that Jesus is talking about in our gospel. But when we do that, we make captive the hope that lives in the unexpectedness. For that unexpectedness is the visible sign of God's freedom, the freedom that raised his Son from the dead against all expectations, that freedom to share that resurrection, that reconciliation with all his creation, with you and with me.

And that reconciliation takes the form of a new creation. Something we cannot even imagine, let alone control or participate in. It is a pure gift, and our hope lies in the very unexpectedness of that gift.

How many of you have Christmas lists? Show of hands? How many of you are already checking down the lists – that's what yesterday was all about, right? So when did Christmas lists become like pick lists in a warehouse? It's a gift, but it's a totally expected gift, a transaction: I ask. You give. The list writer is as important a part of the process as the gift giver.

And if you don't get the stuff you ask for? Disappointment. Trips to customer service and return counters to correct the errors that were made by the gift givers. Prayer can often become the same process. Here's what I want, God.

Disappointment and anger at the Pastor or the Church or God because the expectation was not meant.

"But I was hoping that ... I'd get Halo 2 or big red bike." "But I was hoping that Mom's cancer would go into remission, not spread throughout her body." Two sides of the same coin. Though the word "hope" was used in both statements what was really being said was, "I wanted" or "I desired". Not really hope at all in the sense that scripture talks about it. Our use and understanding of hope is missing an openness, an availability, even a welcoming for the unexpected in our lives. And unexpectedness, by

definition, does not meet our expectations. Aren't the gifts that are completely unexpected, a total surprise the most welcome? Aren't they what you think of as a gift rather than a present – something just presented - here?

But the entirety of the Scripture from the moment of creation in Genesis to the arrival of the new creation, the New Jerusalem when God comes down from heaven to live among his people is a story of non-stop surprise. Prayers are answered in completely unexpected ways. Calls are issued to the most unlikely people. God speaks through the mighty and the lowly alike. Blessings appear in the most incredible and head-scratching manners possible.

And Jesus is telling us today that it is no different for us. God continues to confound our reason and common sense. Why? Because he is God.

Not good enough? Hang in there, you might not get what you expect or deserve or desire, but you will receive God. And that is the only reason to hope. The only reason you need. The only thing that really is hope

That's the story were beginning today – or are we ending it? Is it Advent or Passion Sunday? Aren't we expecting King? Than why is he on a donkey? Why is he a baby in a manger? What is up with that? Why does the light of the star of Bethlehem

shining down on the infant Jesus look so much like the first rays of light on Easter morning? How does a place of failure and death become the symbol of triumph and resurrection? How does the creator of the universe come to know my name and that it matters to him that I do not die?

You know, in a way it's perfectly consistent, this expecting the unexpected from God. It is the heart of our relationship with Him. I would expect that with all my sins, I would be doomed. But because I have a God who does not do the expected, but positively delights in the unexpected, I can hope for my salvation for Jesus' sake. I can see in the story today that not knowing when he is coming good news. It only matters that I hope and pray for him to come, in the words of our Offertory hymn today:

Come thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free
From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear desire of ev'ry nation, Joy of every longing heart.

As we begin our Advent journey together, look for all of these hopes in unexpected places.

Amen.

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