



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 3 Year A

The Unexpected

[RCL]: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9 or Canticle 15; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

“Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...” begins our collect for today. This sounds like one thing, but it means something else entirely, doesn’t it? It sounds like God is out at Hogwarts with Harry Potter, stirring up a potion of power that is going to be unleashed when God walks amongst us like some giant comic book superhero. But then there’s this business of waiting for a baby to be born—not quite the same idea.

The prophet Isaiah describes a world redeemed by God, and it’s pretty amazing: weak hands will be strengthened, feeble knees will be made firm, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the tongue of the speechless sing for joy, waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and a highway shall be there called the Holy Way—just for God’s people—and they will never go astray. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Doesn’t that sound marvelous? It sounds like God is stirring up power there. But then again, where does this baby we are waiting for fit into this? Shouldn’t we be looking for someone who already has power, someone who knows the ways of the world and can lead us through them? Can we trust in a God that asks us to wait along with a pregnant mother for a baby to be born into poverty? That seems like a lot to ask.

In a day and age when we often rely only on ourselves to get things done, it’s asking a lot of us to trust in a God who wants us to renounce control and expect the unexpected. It makes us nervous and makes us question if we really heard God right. In today’s Gospel reading, even John the Baptist is unsure of himself, and sends one of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” This is not what John expected. The road was prepared for the Messiah to restore the world to God’s vision, but the method was not what John – or anyone – was expecting.

Goals. Expectations. Hopes. Surely Mary had all those things for the child she was anxiously waiting for. Perhaps our parents had these expectations for us, and we have passed them on to the next generations. But what happens when new parents receive an unexpected diagnosis for their newborn child? What if we are never even able to have the child we long for? What happens when a beloved youth we have known for years becomes an addict? What happens when our adult children are unable to or simply refuse to care for us in our old age? When God does not answer our prayers for the way we want things to be, then what?

We put a lot of hope in people, and when the circumstances do not measure up to our expectations, we need help in grieving the loss of those hopes. It's tough. Navigating the loss of the goals we have for ourselves, our children, and especially our God, can rock the foundation of our beliefs about the world and our place in it. We climb the ladder that society presents us with to obtain the idol of "being top dog," "getting what's mine," and "being first." This ladder is built rung by rung by looking to a fictional goal – a goal that does not exist. But we believe in it and are willing to hurt others and ourselves to achieve it and stay on top.

The lesson of renouncing control over what God is doing is a tough one and we are called to learn it again and again. For those parents that give birth to children with unexpected difficult needs, the lesson is immediate. Emily Perl Kingsley writes about this in her personal story of having a differently-abled child in *A Trip to Holland*:

"I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability – to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this...

"When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans... the Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel, gondolas. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

"After several months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, 'Welcome to Holland!' 'Holland?' you say. 'What do you mean, Holland? I signed up for Italy. I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.'

"But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place full of pestilence, famine, and disease. It's just a different place.

"So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around. You begin to notice that Holland has windmills. Holland has tulips. And Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say, 'Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned.'

"And the pain of that experience will never, ever, ever, go away. The loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland."

The things we expect to happen that don't, the life we expected to lead and didn't, the church that was never supposed to change but has, the Messiah that was supposed to look like the King of Glory and didn't, the baby that Mary carried under her heart who dies a brutal death on the cross—we have mourned these losses for centuries. Our expectations—our goals—have taken detours in their outcomes, and we spend considerable amounts of energy trying to fictionalize the truth. We desperately believe that we really do have control over each element of our lives—that if we just close our eyes and imagine that we are in Italy, we won't be in Holland.

What a waste. What a waste of the Good News that God has brought to us in the places where we are. What a waste of the preparation we have done to open ourselves to God dwelling with us and in us. God is leading us down the Holy Highway, but the destination is unknown. It may be Holland. It may be Cuba. Regardless, God is with us. The Creator of the earth and stars is ushering in a new way of life, often in the midst of the pain of the old. No wonder Mary's soul proclaims with wonder! It is about God's expectations, not ours.

When a reporter once asked Gandhi what the secret to his happiness was, he replied, "Three words. Renounce and enjoy." Renounce the perceived control we think we have and embrace the grace that God has given us in its stead. Open our eyes to the wonders of the Holland-places in our lives. Only when we let go of our expectations, can we finally enjoy God's gifts to us.

May we all take up Advent's invitation to the leap of faith that awaits us and find God in the unexpected outcomes. Amen.

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