

## UNEXPECTED

It is my impression that most of us know and see clearly the difference between Jesus and the Messiah that was expected. If we do not, then Advent makes no sense at all. The Messiah that was expected was to be a descendant of King David, the warrior King who united all Israel and extended her borders from Egypt to the Euphrates River. This Messiah (the Anointed King) was not divine, but would fulfill the covenant promises and bring Israel back into the prominence of her true destiny and purpose. Therefore this Messiah would be victorious in battle, and both wise enough and powerful enough to unite all the squabbling factions of Israel and lead them back into the realities that God had promised.

That the Messiah could be defeated and crucified was unthinkable. That the Messiah would not bring peace and prosperity to the Jewish nation was unthinkable. Some people still act surprised that so many Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, but Jesus did not fulfill any of the expectations of the long-expected Messiah. What is really remarkable is that some Jews *did* become disciples and followers, shifting their entire perspective – and their lives along with it – to a Kingdom not of this world, and to a Messiah who was after far greater Life and Truth than anything this world had to offer.

Last week we mentioned that the true Christmas is God's doing – not our doing. "*He comes like a thief in the night.*" Most of us have experienced Jesus "coming to us" numerous times and always surprisingly. The Pilgrimage is a spiritual journey. Jesus invites us into a Kingdom which is an endless journey of awakening, challenges, new assignments, new possibilities. Once we get past the apocalyptic expectations about the Day of Judgment – one big test and then we are in or out and it's over – then the road opens up, and the Holy Spirit is not in the past or merely in the future. And every time we get a new revelation, a new breakthrough, or a new assignment, it is Advent all over again for us. And the teaching about the thief in the night is appropriate all over again.

I had to laugh: Several of you complained that you did not like the "thief" imagery. You did not think it very clarifying or appropriate. You do realize that this is not *my* imagery?! Jesus does this to us all the time. It's like a little "bee sting" for awakening. We do not like most of Jesus' imagery at first. Who wants to be a prodigal son or a

crass elder brother? Who wants to be old wine that turns away from His new wine? Who wants to be a dishonest steward; somebody who will not come to the wedding banquet; a wolf in sheep's clothing; somebody who puts their hand to the plough but then keeps looking back and wishing they had not chosen the life of a follower? Did Jesus ever tell a parable that any of us liked – at first? I suspect we like a few of them before we think about them long enough to notice what they are really saying.

“Never put all your eggs in one basket.” Much too risky. We all know how wise that is. But *“the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, upon finding one pearl of inestimable value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”* (Matthew 13:46) Jesus is nuts. Crazy. Different. Unexpected. Jesus tells us that the dumbest thing we can do, when it comes to the Kingdom, is to play it safe. If we don't put all our eggs in this basket, we miss it all. Risking *all that we have* is part of the journey. And Jesus will act it out and live it out Himself. There is no way to pretend that He was being theoretical or figurative or merely symbolic.

So Jesus is an UNEXPECTED Messiah. Jesus does not fit into any of our normal hopes or expectations. Jesus does not fit into our normal assumptions about life, what we want, what we want to be like, or what we are trying to accomplish.

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It is familiar, yet still startling, to stand back from the story of Jesus and realize that no other man who has ever lived on earth has had so deep an impact on so many people, over so many years. It may be fun to debate such a statement. It is interesting to muse about how the world might be different if Jesus had never come. I have been in many conversations with people who like to propose that Jesus has caused incredible strife and turmoil in our world. They act like this is some kind of important insight that only they have ever had. Like Jesus did not know this? *“You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword [dissention].”* (Matthew 10:34; Luke 12:51) His whole story shifts into a different light if we begin to realize that He is serious and telling us the truth. If there is nothing wrong here – if the world is wonderful just the way it is – this might be a sad statement indeed. But that is not the case. If the Messiah of God has come to pat us on the head and tell us everything is just fine and none of us need to change, convert,

or repent, that would be truly devastating. That would be as misleading and empty as the Christmas most people are planning to celebrate this year.

And yet, despite all the aberrations and all the ways we try to disguise our alienation from God, the Messiah still comes. Never *en masse*, but here and there, an individual – a real person – gets a glimmer they were not prepared for, a “calling” they had not heard before. And after the dizziness clears and the disorientation settles down, a new follower is on the PATH. I do not think that Jesus’ reputation on earth is anywhere near what it ought to be. We have neglected the records; we have refused to learn from our errors; we have added layer after layer of our own agendas, preconceived notions, and wishful thinking. We have even superimposed onto Jesus some of our darkest angers and desires.

Yet the overwhelming reality is that Jesus has had a greater impact on our world than any other person who has ever lived here. This becomes ten times more startling when we stop to ponder how He managed to have so much influence. That is, Jesus did not do any of the things that we think would make a person influential, successful, or famous. And Jesus did a lot of things that we think would *prevent* a person from becoming influential, successful, or famous. This means that Jesus is not only incredibly influential, but He reaches us in ways we do not expect to be reached. He appeals to us on levels we do not think can work. He touches us in places we did not even know we had within us.

Down through the centuries, in country after country and culture after culture, Jesus has drawn to His cause and to His own personal leadership thousands upon thousands of individuals. Nearly all of them have concluded that their lives are better because of Him, even in this world. Most of the people who get to know Jesus very well would rather die than lose Him – that is, they are no longer willing to live without Him. Yet the vast majority of them do not think that Jesus has promised them any of the rewards that this world most values: health, money, popularity, success, power. Such things may come, but they are not promised. The only thing Jesus promises them is a personal relationship with the Living God. Everything else comes as it will and falls where it may.

Some of Jesus' followers have been incredibly successful in this world – incredibly wealthy and powerful in the world's terms. Some of His followers have been persecuted, tortured, mocked, destroyed. Either way, it does not seem to make much difference to the bond between Jesus and His followers. That is, what happens between Jesus and His followers does not have any direct connection to what is going on in the outer world. Somehow the reality of it – what it is really about – is based in a different dimension, and it calls forth effort and loyalty that operate here but are not and cannot be controlled by anything that is happening here.

Do any of us imagine that we could design such a movement? Could we put it together and make it work? Trying to imagine how we would try to do it is often what helps us to realize how amazing Jesus really is. People who discount Jesus or think He is explainable in human terms simply have not thought about it very much. Jesus is a never-ending surprise. There are the little miracles of His own ministry, such as people being healed – people being changed. One of the greatest miracles on earth is seeing a human being change an opinion or an attitude, and people who come in contact with Jesus nearly always change their attitudes and even some of their opinions. If it happened just once or twice, it would be merely interesting. But hundreds of thousands of people over two thousand years? Their attitudes do not get perfect, and they themselves know it. Yet the fact is that some of their attitudes do change – and keep changing. If even one attitude changes, life simply cannot stay the same. It is a universal impossibility. One attitude change, and your old life is gone forever: from fear to faith; from resentment to gratitude; from being alone to belonging to God's Kingdom. Earthquakes make headlines, but they are minuscule in comparison.

There are other kinds of miracles in the wake of Jesus' ministry as well. Despite incredible pressure from Zealots and other patriotic influences, Jesus refused to become part of an insurrectionist movement against the Roman Empire. Over and over, people tried to get Jesus to make statements of anger or disapproval against Rome. Even though it cost Him the support and respect of many people in His time, Jesus refused to play in this arena. Only, it was not because He did not care or had no interest or purpose or plan. The truth, almost beyond belief, is that Jesus *did* conquer the Roman Empire. Only, He did it in His own way and in His own time – a WAY nobody on earth could have imagined or taken seriously. It took three hundred years (and Jesus' followers did not use the sword), but Rome finally turned

away from emperor worship and all the vast temples and ceremonies of its former gods to claim Jesus as Savior and Son of God. If someone had announced this future to Pilate or Tiberius Caesar, they would have thought them to be stark raving mad.

You know I am only touching the fringes of the real drama. The coming of Jesus into our world has *not* been successful in the light of any of the values, purposes, goals, or truths that Jesus proclaims. The world is not that good yet. There are only pockets of His followers, scattered here and there upon earth. I believe that His purposes will never come to completion in this world. I think Jesus makes it very clear that it will not. It is equally clear to us, I hope, that despite this, Jesus calls us and expects us to live for these very purposes and toward this end through all our days *right here and now*, knowing full well that it will not work here – not like we hope and wish and want; certainly not in any fullness. But we live for it anyway. *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.”*

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I keep running into people who think their own wisdom and most of their own behavior just naturally fall in line with Jesus’ wisdom and purpose. They see themselves as naturally spiritual and highly evolved. They say that if anybody taps into their own best inner self, they are already pretty much in synch with Jesus; Jesus is wonderful, but not that special. And they say that lots of other folk have taught and displayed pretty much the same spiritual awareness and stature that Jesus displays, so let’s not get overexcited. Let’s not get all carried away or out of balance. Decorate the tree; buy some gifts; you are okay the way you are; God loves you; keep politically correct; everybody be nice – and it will all come out fine in the end.

Do we think that’s really what it is all about? Our culture has Jesus pretty tamed down and figured out, doesn’t it? Nothing unexpected. A little “Golden Rule” here, a little “love your neighbor” there – never mind a Savior; never mind conversion; never mind turning your entire life and will over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. Just a little tweaking here, a little adjustment there, and we can go on with life pretty much in the same way we always have – with us in charge, of course.

Sometimes people tell me that statements like this are harsh. Why be harsh in a world as peaceful and nearly perfect as ours? And on what basis could anybody possibly object to people doing the best they can: being responsible; taking charge; deciding things according to what they think will work out best for themselves and those they love? “Let’s be reasonable.” How we love that word “reasonable.” Funny how often it really means staying the way we already are. Anyway, it is clear to most of us that the problem is that some people are *not* responsible; do *not* take charge; try to live off of others; do not keep the rules; keep damaging and destroying everything around them, including themselves; do not hold up their end of anything. They just live for their own momentary gratification.

It is true – such people wreck society. But they do not wreck the Kingdom of God any more than we do – sometimes not as much. “*Then Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you: tax-collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’*” (Matthew 21:31) “*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.*” (Matthew 5:20)

The one thing we humans can never get clear and keep clear about the Kingdom of God is that in the Kingdom of God, God is the King. We cannot do things “our way” in the Kingdom of God. Everybody’s opinion is not as good as everyone else’s. We do not get to vote on what is right or true. *Obedience* is part of love, and being rebellious is no longer brave or commendable. Total allegiance to the King is the only way the Kingdom can work. Getting thrown out of the Garden of Eden is not just “fun and games” if there really is a God and if we are the creatures – not the Creator.

There may indeed be other ways to enter the Kingdom on earth. Jesus seems to imply that this is so, but that’s not my affair. What I suspect for you and what I know for me is that the only way we can get into the Kingdom is if we give our hearts and lives to the King’s Son, who came to this earth for the very purpose of reaching us, inviting us, choosing us – and in the end, carrying us personally into where we, by our own efforts and merit, *can never go*.

We do not see the end of anything here – how much power Jesus’ efforts really take; how much caring they represent; how much it costs Him to do all that for us. But some of us do see and feel the front end of it – the love, the Presence with us, the guidance. And we only get

into that part of it when we trust Him enough to turn will and life over to Him. Will and life. Baptism is a drowning. We die to our former life, and He raises us up for a new one. That is not the end of the story – that’s for openers! That is what gets it started. And that takes us back to the real Advent, and the true Christmas.

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Christmas is about One who is chosen, called forth, and then sent. Christmas is not about how we evolve – how we turn out if we get a good education; work hard; provide good families for our children; pay off the mortgage. Yes, Jesus grew up like a normal human being in this world. Incarnation is about God putting it on *our* level. The Message is so startling and new, the WAY of Life so different, and the Message of God’s caring and love so unbelievable that it has to come from our own level – from somebody who is one of us – or we would scatter like frightened birds. (Much of the time we do that anyway.) Jesus was gifted, to be sure, but He lived like a normal human being until His baptism – until the descent of the Holy Spirit. After that, something was very different. He was still very human, but also far more than human. And Jesus Himself knew it was different. He knew He was sent. He saw everything in a different light. He knew that each one of us is of far more worth to God than anybody on earth has ever dreamed or thought before.

It is easy to say that lots of others have been as advanced as Jesus – that they have said or taught the same thing – but show me who they are. Name them. Tell me what they wrote or said. I have read the Bhagavad Gita, pondered the Dhammapada, and appreciated the Tao Te Ching. Some very great teachers have walked this earth. Among them, there is considerable agreement about ethics – about good behavior. But after that, they do *not* teach the same things as Jesus. Far from it! And tell me: Who crucified them? And how many witnesses were there to their resurrection? I’m sorry; nobody said it or believed it or lived for it the WAY Jesus did.

Nobody knew it or claimed it, never mind lived and died for it, before Jesus. Certainly we thought God had plans; cared about the nation or the community; raised up heroes and leaders to further the nation’s destiny; maybe even protected and guided us so we could get our work done. But nobody knew, dreamed, or said that God loved every individual like his own child, or that God had built a personal identity and purpose within them, or that God wanted them to spend

all eternity in his Kingdom. We thought maybe a few of the very best, for services rendered, would be rewarded. That is a very far cry from the Gospel our Savior taught and bought for us.

Yes, Christianity came out of Judaism, but it was also a whole new dimension – a new and different Covenant. Jesus was SENT. It was not just an accident; He was not just the one-hundredth monkey; it was not just the next logical step – that is, if Jesus had not done it, somebody else would have. God chose *to reveal* himself in Jesus the Christ. And His coming into our world was so striking, so unusual, so different and startling that nobody else who has ever lived here has had such an enormous impact.

Do not be fooled by the way our culture pretends to be all happy and comfortable with it: families gathering; pretty decorations; lots of us showing kindness and generosity. That is always wonderful, any time of the year. But if your Christmas has anything to do with Jesus, then that's a whole different story. He comes because He knows that you are far more – and far more important – than you have any notion about. And if we allow the connection, it takes Life out of our hands and puts it on a whole different level, and we have no way to know what will come of that. New lives for old – that is the Message. And that is the offer.



## COMMUNION

This is the strangest victory banquet our world has ever known. From our world's perspective, it is a prelude to utter defeat and catastrophe. The eerie words are still hard to face and fathom. *"On the same night in which He was betrayed and abandoned, our Lord took bread ..."*

Forgive me while I weep uncontrollably ...

We are instructed to share this meal "in memory of Him." But it happened two thousand years ago, and we were not even there. What memories do we have?

Well, life does not happen in the very limited, one-dimensional ways we sometimes pretend when we are being objective, precise, and technical. We are flooded with memories of Jesus, when we are not determined to be aloof, uninvolved, unreachable. Some of our memories of Jesus are more powerful and more clear and more "real" than most any other memories we have. That's the trouble with having souls; we are created with more "radar equipment" than we ever admit to most of those around us.

So we gather again, like all the generations of Christians before us: to remember Him – to celebrate this meal, which is forerunner of the banquet awaiting us in His Kingdom. And indeed it is a victory banquet. Realities open up from this supper with our Lord that stupefy and blow beyond all the realities of this world. *"In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer – I have overcome the world."*

*"On the same night in which He was betrayed and forsaken, our Lord took bread, and when He had given thanks [and never does He proceed without giving thanks – and who can imagine His giving thanks on a night like this?!], He broke it and said, 'This is my body, broken for you. This do in remembrance of me.'"*

*"In the same manner also He took the cup, when they had supped, saying, 'This cup is the New Covenant in my blood. This do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, ye do proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again."*

Ministering to you in His name, we give you this bread and this cup.