

“The Gift of the Unexpected”
A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2019 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

In a recent “Sabbath Moment” blog Terry Hershey tells the story of a father who took his son on a world-wide trip. The dad’s goal was not what you might guess. What he had in mind was to expose his son to “underprivileged” countries, show how “poor people” live. The story doesn’t let us in on why. Maybe so the boy would appreciate what he had. Your guess is as good as mine. But as the story goes when they got back home, dad asked his son, “So what did you see, what did you learn?” The boy answered:

“I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden, and they have a river with no end in sight. We have imported lanterns to give light in our garden in the evening, and they look at the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard, and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on, and they have fields that go beyond their sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve one another. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.”

As the father stood, speechless, the boy said, “Thank you, dad, for showing me how poor we really are.”

Obviously, this was not what the father expected. I wonder if the point of the story is not only about the man teaching his son what he thought the son needed to see but about something startling happening to teach the man something he needed to see: what was more important than his riches.

Something about our Gospel passage seems to resonate doesn’t it? Something about expectations. John the Baptist questions Jesus’ identity: Are you really the ‘one’ – the Messiah we have been waiting for or should we wait for another?” Apparently what John is seeing and hearing about Jesus isn’t really what he expected. Remember John the Baptist is the one before Jesus’ baptism who tells those gathered by the River Jordan in the wilderness: “I baptize you with water; he (the one we are expecting) will baptize you with fire!” I wonder if John was frustrated with how Jesus was turning out.

Where is the purifying fire? Where is the powerful one that John had prophesied and envisioned at the time of Jesus’ baptism? Didn’t John think he would be baptizing, introducing to the world, a messiah powerful and mighty – a successful and dramatic King like King David, or a great leader like Moses? Like the Jews then hoped for. Maybe we’re not very different: hoping for something more powerful and mighty and important. A radical, maybe heretical thought: “Does a newborn baby in a manger really do it for us?” Sweet and dear, but someone to change our lives?

Our collect this morning asks God “to stir up your power and with great might come among us.” What are we asking for and how does the Gospel story play a part in God’s answer? Maybe the Gospel story is supposed to surprise us with an unexpected outcome, of seeing not perhaps what John hoped for in Jesus – but to see what the exercise of power and might can really offer (sight, ability to walk again, new life, those things Jesus is making happen) when channeled by the greatest gift of all: love.

It’s Advent – a time in our Christian calendar characterized by waiting and expectation. Ours and God’s. It’s a time in our secular worldly calendar also characterized by waiting and expectation. Waiting for Christmas morning and, bluntly spoken, hope for a gift to make our life better.

Here’s the question, “What are we waiting for? What do we want Christmas to bring?”

Some possibilities: Santa Claus to bring the perfect worldly gift. The baby Jesus to be the perfect divine gift the way we want him to grow up to be. Or maybe we’re hoping ourselves to give the perfect gift for folks we love. Or maybe we’ve given up on any of the above, not looking for anything special to happen, just hoping to get to and through that day, move beyond that morning that is supposed to be so magical but which so often doesn’t meet our expectations, ends up disappointing. How many of us would be willing to say: “Hey, God, just surprise us this year!”? And really mean it. More likely we are compelled to add, “Oh by the way, God, here are some suggestions.”

Speaking of gifts and what to expect on Christmas morning, I’m reminded of the story of the Littlest Angel. I used to read it just before Christmas to my kids when they were little. I guess I hoped that they would learn something very special from it – about gifts, expectations, waiting and then being surprised when the unexpected happened. Kind of a lesson, I hoped, about what really matters.

A quick summary. The littlest angel in heaven was kind of lonely, kind of awkward, always losing his halo, getting into trouble – so little, so seemingly insignificant among all the “grown up” beautiful angels who always seemed so perfect, seemed to know what to do, how to be really angelic. An announcement came from God, that God’s son was to be born and if the angels wanted to put together a gift for God’s son, they could. The littlest angel thought and thought and thought and finally figured out what to give the little boy, God’s son, about to be born. And so, he got his gift together. On the appointed night, one by one the angels each placed their gift before the throne of God. The littlest angel, too, as he so proudly and excitedly laid his – a little box - before the throne. Yes, the littlest angel thought, it looks kind of small – his rough little box, not very beautiful on the outside, but inside, wonderful things that a Child of God would treasure – as he, the little angel had treasured them in his heart when he was a little boy on earth. But when he saw all the glorious other gifts lined up before God, his little heart sank. How could he have thought his gift was fit for a king, even a little child king. It looked so shabby, even

ugly, worthless, among all the other gifts. He wanted to grab it back, run away with it, hide it from the sight of God before it was even noticed, before it was too late.

But it was - too late

“The Hand of God moved slowly over all that bright array of shining gifts, then paused, then dropped, then came to rest on the lowly gift of the Littlest Angel! The Littlest Angel trembled as the box was opened and there, before the Eyes of God and all God’s Heavenly Host was what he offered to the Christ Child. And what was his gift to the Blessed Infant? Well there was a butterfly with golden wings, captured one bright summer day on the hills above Jerusalem, and a sky-blue egg from a bird’s nest in the olive tree that stood to shade his mother’s kitchen door. Yes, and two white stones, found on a muddy river bank, where he and his friends had played like small brown beavers, and, at the bottom of the box, a limp, tooth-marked leather strap, once worn as a collar by his mongrel dog, who had died as he had lived, in absolute love and devotion.

“The Littlest Angel wept hot, bitter tears. . . . Why had he ever thought the box was so wonderful? Why had he dreamed that such utterly useless things could be loved by the Blessed Infant? In frantic terror, he turn to run and hide but he stumbled and fell, and with a horrified wail and clatter of halo rolled in a ball of misery to the very foot of the Heavenly Throne! There was an ominous and dreadful silence in the Celestial City, undisturbed save for the heartbroken sobbing of the Littlest Angel. Then, the Voice of God, like Divine Music, rose and swelled through Paradise? The Voice spoke:

“Of all the gifts of all the angels, I find that this small box pleases Me most. Its contents are of the Earth and of (those living there), and My Son is born to be King of both. These are the things My Son, too, will know and love and cherish and then, regretful, will leave behind Him when His task is done. I accept this gift in the Name of the Child, Jesus, born of Mary this night in Bethlehem.

“There was a breathless pause, and then the rough, unsightly box of the Littlest Angel began to glow with a bright, unearthly light, then the light became a lustrous flame, the flame became a radiant brilliance that blinded the eyes of all the angels. The brilliant light rose from its place before the Throne of God as the Littlest Angel watched it arch the firmament of heaven to stand and shed its clear, white beckoning starlight over a stable where a Child was born.”

Another story this morning with unexpected outcomes. About being surprised about what really matters. At the heart of these stories are moments of brilliance and clarity – parables in a way to teach us about power and might, being poor and being rich.

The stark but beautiful Christmas hymn, “In the bleak mid-winter” comes to mind this time of year when darkness and coldness seems to want to overcome warmth and light. The words in the final verse are really a surprise as the author of the hymn seems to be imagining being drawn to a rough-hewn manger in a poor stable place – wondering what to offer, perhaps also wondering what he will receive.

“What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part, yet what I can I give him, give him my heart.”

The greatest gifts always are the gifts of the heart. Truth be told, isn't what any of us really want is simply love? Isn't it obvious that what God really wants to give and even what God really wants to receive is love?

Love is scary, it's risky. As a gift to give, as a gift to receive. Will our gift of love be accepted, is it good enough? Will the one who wants to give us a gift think we are good enough for it? So Christmas morning waits for us with its gift. The gift of love given, love received. The gift of Joy, of being surprised on Christmas morning when starlight breaks through the dark winter night and Love comes – the perfect gift for a waiting world with hearts open to take it in, make a home for it, give and receive it. May Christmas morning dawn on our experiencing, treasuring and knowing such graceful love to be true for us.