Sermon by The Reverend Ryan D. Newman
December 15, 2013 | Advent 3
Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10 | Canticle 15 | James 5:7-10 | Matthew 11:2-11

“Embrace the Unexpected”

Those who know me, know that every September and April, I embark on a spiritual journey with millions of other faithful and holy people. With the grandest of expectations, I pour my blood, sweat, and tears into my preparation for and experience the holy of holies. Outsiders, including my wife, mock us—they question our purpose and scoff at our steadfastness. “You are insane!” Erin shouts from the other room; but I persevere. Amid my journey, the dogs sometimes hide underneath the dining room table as they are overwhelmed by my passion and conviction; especially when they hear me speaking in colorful tongues. My fall spiritual journey lasts only about 14 weeks, but my spring journey lasts well into the summer, and on the rare, but blessed occasion, it may go into late October. At the heart of these journeys is the anticipation and expectation. Unfortunately, most of these spiritual journeys end in heartbreak, disappointment, and others failing to live up to the expectations—and to the hype.

This is the life of a college football and baseball monastic. Each September, as a devoted USC Trojan football fan, I begin my pilgrimage, and too often by late October USC has failed to live up to their pre-season expectations. With spring comes the glorious resurrection of baseball season and my love affair with the Los Angeles (Anaheim) Angels. Sadly, usually by the 4th of July, the Angels have failed to meet all of my expectations and, once again, I return to the prison cell of being an obsessive, compulsive sports fan with too high expectations and nothing to show for it but disappointment.

If you think about it . . . we spend a great deal of our life either preparing, experiencing, or reflecting upon moments of expectations. Our expectations can be big; a new job, the college application process, getting married, buying a house. Our expectations can be small; will it rain today, what I am going to wear, or will the light change from green to red just before we get to the signal. Expectations fill our daily lives.

The popular reality television show Survivor, where contestants (aka “castaways”) are isolated in a remote, wilderness environment and must survive the elements and each other, has branded its signature phrase “expect the unexpected.” Surprisingly, even in the “unreality” of a reality television and a show that features people being marooned on a island and filmed 24/7, the unexpected is real. People get hurt, people crack mentally, castaways fail to get along, and the strongest, most athletic people often don’t win.
We find ourselves moving through life managing the expected and trying to anticipate the unexpected. Our expectations give us a sense of purpose and mission. Our experience with and response to the unexpected often shapes our character and provides us the gift of wisdom and grace.

Sometimes the unexpected turns out to be transformative: When Gustave Eiffel’s engineering company began designing and building the Eiffel tower for the 1889 World’s Fair, it was expected that the structure would remain for a maximum of 20 years. But in 1909, the tower’s unexpected popularity made it very difficult for the city of Paris to dismantle the iconic tower. Unbelievably, in the early 1900’s, a con artist named Victor Lustig “sold” the tower for scrap metal, not once, but twice—he was later arrested for his fraudulent business ventures. Did the buyers truly expect to take possession of their purchase? Nevertheless, what started out as a showy experiment for the 1889 World Fair’s has now become the most-visited paid monument in the world. We can say with some certainty that the citizens of Paris in 1889 did not expect the Eiffel Tower to one day come to symbolize Paris.

Then there is other times when the unexpected, and even the expected can be disappointing. What then? What happens when the expected does not live up to our expectations? And what are we to do especially with the shock and/or disappointment of the unexpected?

Last week in the Gospel reading, John the Baptist’s ministry was thriving on the banks of the Jordan. Once again this morning, John takes center stage in our Gospel reading but things are very different.

The walls have literally closed in on John. At the height of his ministry and his preparation for the Lord, thousands of people flocked to the Jordan River to be baptized. The greatest of these candidates for baptism was Jesus Christ himself.

Now John finds himself a political prisoner of King Herod, awaiting execution, for challenging Herod’s unrighteous marriage. John must be wondering if all that he did, all he had testified to, all that he set in motion was for not.

From a dark and isolated prison cell, John the Baptist finds himself wrestling with the unexpected ministry of Jesus of Nazareth—wondering if Jesus is truly the one promised to Israel. Matthew’s Gospel tells us “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

We wonder why John the Baptist has begun to question whether Jesus is truly the messiah. John had no doubts about Jesus’ when John’s ministry was in full force at the Jordan River; however, from John’s prison cell his mindset and feelings had drastically changed.

The truth was “Jesus was not following John’s . . . step-by-step plan for a successful Messianic ministry.” Remember as we heard last week, “John had told people the axe was lying at the root, ready to chop down the unworthy trees. He had promised the chaff would burn with unquenchable fire. But Jesus didn’t seem to be pointing the finger of judgment. There was no smoldering woodpile of sinners”1 to be found.


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Instead, Jesus points toward a very different fulfillment of his Messianic role: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

With expectations comes both hope and disappointment. If we tend to find more disappointment than hope in our expectations, it might be our expectations that are misaligned, not the outcome. This football and baseball fan can relate. This was also the case for John the Baptist—the Savior he expected turned out to be a very different person—a very different messiah.

Similarly, with the unexpected also comes both opportunity and uncertainty. If we allow the uncertainty to consume our vision, we become blinded from seeing the opportunities that grow from the unexpected. Learning to embrace the blessing of uncertainty opens further the door of opportunity. Unexpected does not mean unthinkable, it simply means unpredictable.

Eugene Land was a self-made millionaire. He had been a featured speaker at board meetings and conventions. However, on a fall day in East Harlem, Mr. Land was about to face an audience that simply terrified him: 59 sixth graders. What could he say to inspire these students, many whom would drop out of school based on a neighborhood high school graduation rate of less than 20%. He expected blank stares and hard hearts.

Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart and the unexpected began to open the door to transformation. “Stay in school,” he said, “and I’ll help pay the college tuition for every one of you.” Six years later, nearly 90% of that 6th grade class went on to graduate from high school. One class member was even the valedictorian of his school and in his valedictorian speech he retold the story of Mr. Land’s visit to his 6th grade class and said, “I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling.”

We have something to look forward to, something waiting for us.

Our savior draws near . . . Our unexpected draws near.

Don’t expect the unexpected, embrace the unexpected.

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