

When the Unexpected Happens

As a priest one of the things I have learned about the holiday season is to expect the unexpected. No matter how organized you are, no matter how well you plan the Advent and Christmas schedule, something unexpected is bound to happen. Maybe it will be the death of a parishioner, or someone being diagnosed with a serious illness, or a family in crisis, but the holidays, I have found, rarely go as planned.

The trouble is: I always think the unexpected will happen to someone else – not me.

One Saturday night in Advent, it happened to me. It happened when I was Rector of a parish in San Diego – a large church of close to 2300 members. After celebrating the Saturday 5:00 P.M. Eucharist, I went to my office to do some work, and got home before eight. Heather and Allison were at a concert that evening, so I ate some leftovers, watched the news and then decided to read in bed before getting a good night's sleep.

I was reading for about an hour when all of a sudden, I felt this incredible pain in my side and back. At first, I thought I strained a muscle. But the pain only got worse, and soon I was in agony – dizzy, sweaty, and nauseous. I had never experienced such intense pain – was I having a heart attack? I had no idea what was happening, but it seemed like this might be the end.

When Heather and Allison got home sometime past eleven, I told Heather to take me to the emergency room. By 2:30 Sunday morning the doctor confirmed that a kidney stone was the culprit. I was given a painkiller and told to brace myself for more pain until the kidney stone passed through my body. Although I tried to get up that morning for church, I found that I was too dizzy to drive let alone preach. In one of the busiest seasons of the year, I was unable to be at church. The unexpected had happened – to me!

The unexpected happens, doesn't it? Especially during the holiday season, there are times when we may feel that our life is falling apart. Tragedies can seem especially tragic during the holiday season. Isn't it now – even hours before Christmas – that loved ones become ill; that memories of those not with us begin to overshadow the joy we are supposed to be feeling; that war seems more offensive; anger seems more troubling; hurt feels more intense; the nation seems more divided.

Psychologists tell us that these days – during and shortly after the Christmas holiday – are prime days for the suicide rate to increase. These are prime days for depression to become more pronounced. These are days when life's troubles sometimes seem larger than life itself.

Have you ever had days when you feel that life is collapsing all around you? Imagine being a young woman planning your life. Imagine trying to do all of the right things. Imagine trying to make life fit together in a

society where young women were property until claimed by men. Imagine yourself in the shoes of Mary.

An angel came. A message was delivered. Life was never the same again.

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus...”

I think if Mary was one of the young people in today’s world, she might have told that angel to “GET A LIFE!”

But instead the gospel portrays Mary as questioning, yet compliant. Somehow, Mary is enabled to catch the vision. Somehow, she is enabled to see beyond life’s disastrous possibilities. Somehow, she claims herself as a servant of God – ready to fulfill her role in the salvation story.

For Mary to say yes to the angel was no easy decision. She could have lost her future with Joseph. She could have been stoned to death. Her parents, her husband-to-be, and her society could have rejected her, disowned her.

What a risk Mary took in becoming God’s servant! It was what the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard called, “a leap of faith.” But God transformed the hearts of Mary and Joseph, the hearts of all who would hear and witness the events of the quiet birth in Bethlehem. God

transformed the events of those days – so that future generations would hear a story of hope.

From his book entitled, The Book of Bebb, Frederick Buechner recalls the words of the fictional preacher, Bebb, as he calls forth the image of Jesus coming into this world, which is on the brink of disaster.

Bebb preaches: “Friends, Jesus came down out of the heavenly place to this place. Down and down he come, and what did he find when he got here? He found a place where there’s not enough food to stretch around. He found a place where every single night there’s little children going to be crying because that was not their day to eat. He found a place where people are scared stiff of each other most of the time and hide from each other and sometimes come out of their hiding places to do hateful things to each other...”

He goes on to preach, “Jesus found a place where even nature’s gone bad. Where babies are born with little shriveled-up arms and young men with their whole life ahead of them get cancers, and there’s droughts and floods, and peaches are piled up along the road going rotten to keep the price up when there’s people don’t have the price of a peach.”

Now, Bebb is a fictional character, but this world is a real one. He describes what you and I know intimately as this world where everything right seems to go wrong. He describes what we read in the paper, what we hear on the nightly news, what we feel in our own hearts in the quiet of a lonely night, or even what we may be

thinking as we wait to see the doctor in the emergency room.

But Bebb reminds his hearers, as I would remind you today, that when things couldn't get much worse, God sent forth his Son.

We are only a few hours away from that Holy Night. We know the stresses, we hear the cries, and we feel intensely the aches and pains of our human condition. And yet, our God has a word for us. And that word comes in the form of the promise to Mary. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

This is God's promise to us. This is the story of hope – begun quietly in a manger, snuffed out tragically on a cross, and boldly resurrected – to be Lord and Ruler of all times, all disasters, and all peoples.

Turner Classic Movies showed scenes of some of Clark Gable's most noteworthy films. One scene was from a film shot during World War II – and I'm afraid I can't recall the name of it – of Clark Gable and his leading lady singing the old hymn "Abide with me" as German planes are dropping bombs all around them.

I had never imagined Clark Gable as a particularly religious man, but there he was playing the piano and singing that great hymn as the enemy's bombs pounded the mountain landscape.

**I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.**

If you are sometimes overwhelmed by the unexpected, and your world seems in disarray, and when you are hoping that everything will go all right when it goes all wrong, know that the God of all times and peoples abides with you.

Know that God goes with you through whatever adversity life throws your way. Know that God's presence surrounds you and uplifts you in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity, and even in death itself. Know that the babe in a manger is born for you – for hope, for comfort and for peace.

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December 24, 2017
Text – Luke 1:26-38
Advent 4, B**