

Expect the Unexpected

Luke 1:39-55

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Christmas came a few days early this year in Turkmenistan; Turkmenbashi is dead. Saparmurat Niyazov, died on Thursday at the age of 66 of an apparent heart attack. For those of you not well acquainted with the former Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan, this Central Asian country was ruled for 23 quite brutal years by Niyazov, the self-proclaimed Turkmenbashi, meaning the “Father of all Turkmen,” a “father” who has apparently left no succession plan, perhaps having convinced himself that he would live forever. Such a delusion is understandable from a man who would have given any Biblical-era Caesar a run for his money in the “center of the known universe” department. You see, he had, per capita or per square meter, however you count it, more photos, murals, statues, street signs, billboards and banknotes plastered with his likeness than any tyrant in history. He was so pervasive that daily existence in that country was almost inconceivable without him. And so the country is in a state of shock, a good shock for most citizens, as a result of this unexpected turn of events. The long hoped for, but unexpected, has taken place. You see, sixty-six is pretty young these days, for a dictator. Just ask the Cubans in Miami.

In the descriptions coming out about life in Turkmenistan for the last twenty-three years, we have a modern-day glimpse of what life was like under the

Roman Empire in the time during which Mary offered up her now-famous Magnificat, and gave birth to Jesus. We will hear in a little while that the reason Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem was because of a Turkmenbashi-type decree, to count up all of the Emperor's subjects in a census, no matter the consequences. Who knows what the penalty might have been to go uncounted. This Roman occupation had been going on for more than 60 years, under various emperors, but with largely the same policies: high taxes, few services, complete obedience. To have expected Roman rule to come to a rapid end would have been an unwise policy for Jewish mental health, and indeed, perhaps the Pharisee's unending attention given to the details of the Law was an effort to have control over something in their lives. To *hope* for independence, to *hope* for a return to the days of self and Divine rule was certainly something appropriate, but to expect it? That was a recipe for despair. And it was the lack of an expectation for the unexpected that made the news about the coming, and then the birth, of the Messiah, which Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and the shepherds received, so surprising.

There is nothing wrong with hope. We are called to hope. Hope is confidence in God's future for us. Hope is what keeps us going, helps us to believe there is order in the universe. But I think that more than hope, Scripture leads us to an acute form of hope that calls us not just to expect the expected, but to expect the unexpected. You see, we can, and should, expect the sun to come up each day, and it does. We can, and should, expect to be able to get out of bed in the morning, and

for the better part of our lifetimes, that is a reasonable expectation. We can, and should, expect our cars to start, the buses to run, the banks to open. Occasionally they don't, but it's all pretty reliable. It is expecting the unexpected to take place that is a little more challenging. To expect that Turkmenbashi would unexpectedly die before, say, the age of 80, could hardly be called a good bet, even though it could be hoped for. To hope that all war will cease in our lifetime is probably an unreasonable expectation, though there are occasional glimpses of hope. And yet, and yet, time after time, in story after story in the Bible, we are reminded to believe that the unexpected will happen. In fact, it is the norm. It's God's way of doing things, something we can see from our story tonight from Luke, and from one which precedes it, and in our reading from Micah.

You will recall that before Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, Elizabeth's husband Zechariah has an interesting experience in the course of his duties as a Temple priest. One day he receives the long hoped for, but unexpected, call to serve in the area of the altar of incense, deep within the temple center, for there were many priests and few such opportunities. Zechariah no doubt went to work each day expecting to do his temple duty, but probably not expecting to be called to this great honor. And yet it was not by chance that he was chosen, but by God's design. And from our perspective as readers, we are not surprised that Zechariah asks, when told by the angel Gabriel that his barren wife will conceive, "How will I know this is so, for my wife and I are old?" because that is what we

would ask, right? But we are shocked that God does the unexpected by making Zechariah mute right after God has just done the unexpected by choosing Zechariah for special service.

A few months later, that busy angel Gabriel visited Mary with unexpected news of the birth of a savior and king. Now, the expected source of a suitable King would no doubt be one from a background that had a hope of victory, one with education, military history, high standing and the like (as if God has really ever done such a thing!). But God does the unexpected and chooses a poor teenaged and unmarried girl. And we as readers might expect Mary to say, like the prophet Isaiah before her, and like most of us would, “I could never do such a thing. I’m not worthy.” But rather she shocks us by saying “Here am I.”

And then in tonight’s story, it would be reasonable of us to expect Mary to be received by her family with condemnation for her unwed condition, a death penalty offense, but instead, she receives the unexpected welcome of joy, brought on by the Holy Spirit and unborn John’s recognition in the womb of the Messiah within Mary. And finally in the Magnificat, we might be expected to hear that God will bless Israel with power and wealth. What is more surprising is that God’s blesses all with shalom, starting with those at the margins. There is little triumphalism in Mary’s words, simply a restatement of God’s enduring, and very expectable, promises.

As we know the Bible, none of this story should really seem surprising. But what made it amazing, rather than simply satisfying, to the hearers of those glad tidings, is that they had evidently forgotten that this way of acting on the world was remarkably similar to how God has always acted: choosing the unlikely sons of a family rather than the destined, using prostitutes and widows to provide for God's people, and on and on, and that God even declared ahead of time God's intention to do the unexpected again. Yes, the timetable may not have been published for all Israel to monitor, but isn't that what makes events unexpected? You see, in the overall and divine scheme of things, what seems to us like forever in its coming, may come early from God's perspective.

Let me conclude with what might be considered some practical considerations on expecting the unexpected. I said earlier that our faith calls us to an acute form of hope of expecting the unexpected. Take Christmas for example. All too often, we know exactly what to expect from our Christmases. We may be surprised by an unexpectedly thoughtful gift, but we have our traditions, and our hymns, and our ways of thinking about the holiday that may actually help us to miss some of the wonder and grace that God may be trying to reveal to us. I would submit that we should on the lookout for, and grateful for, and dare I say expecting, that God will do the unexpected to our Christmases, like placing an uninvited guest in our midst, or causing a not-quite-by-chance meeting between family members in need of reconciliation, or misplacing the wrapped gifts so that

the important ones can be exchanged. Sometimes the unexpected will be convenient and comfortable, other times frustrating and frightening, but, as Ebenezer Scrooge experienced in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol," more worthwhile than we could ever imagine.

The same idea applies for the rest of the year and for the rest of our lives. It has been said that the easiest way to avoid being disappointed is to keep one's expectations low. Besides being true, it is often practiced and perhaps this is why leaders and supervisors and parents are often reminded that people tend to rise to the level of expectation that has been set for them. This is to say that if we expect little from them, we will receive little in return. And although it might seem counterintuitive for us to apply the same logic with respect to God, as if God were at our bidding, it is also true that if we expect little from God in our lives, that is very likely what we will experience, for we will have marked the boundaries in which we experience God's activity, and ground the lenses through which we see how God works in the world. But if we expect God to do the unexpected in our lives, if we ask God to do that, more than likely we will be spiritually and ethically stretched and pulled and molded and shaped in ways we never could have imagined. Our reading tonight reminds us that even when we do not seek out the unexpected it comes to us, but how much more could we live in God's way of being if we opened ourselves to the unexpected on a regular basis. You see, if we expect the unexpected to happen, we might be able to recognize it more easily, be

in tune with it sooner, and cooperate all the more smoothly, whether it affects us positively or negatively.

Christmas came a few days early in Turkmenistan this year for Turkmenbashi is dead. But the holiday will be chaotic to be sure for the lack of expecting the unexpected, as citizens and expatriates scramble to put together a new, and hopefully just, society, starting from scratch. Perhaps the Turkmeni people will recognize God's hand in this event, a present day example of Mary's words that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away rich away empty." Had they taken Mary's words to heart, as we should, they might not have been caught in such a power vacuum. As we prepare our hearts and minds to receive Christ this Christmas, let us make Mary's words our own, always expecting God to do the unexpected in our lives and in the world. Amen.