

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, November 29, 2020

– Advent 1 - Communion

Hymns: 122 - O Come O Come Emmanuel; A Candle is Burning;

114 – Emmanuel, Emmanuel; 663 – God, whose giving knows no ending

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55; James 1:16-18

Sermon Title: Unexpected Christmas, Unexpected Gift

Luke 1:46-55 (NKJV)

And Mary said:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.

For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.

And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with His arm;

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.

He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy,

As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever.”

James 1:16-18 (ERV)

My dear brothers and sisters, don't be fooled about this. Everything good comes from God. Every perfect gift is from him. These good gifts come down from the Father who made all the lights in the sky. But God never changes like the shadows from those lights. He is always the same. God decided to give us life through the true message he sent to us.

Well, Christmas is going to be a bit different this year. A lot different. Nobody expected the Corona virus, and when it hit, eight or nine months ago, few of us expected it to still be around as a major part of our life this Christmas. We're going to have to figure out new and different ways to celebrate with friends, with family. It's all a bit unexpected. But fortunately, we're in good company with those who experienced the very first Christmas. For them, Christmas came roaring in from out of the blue, and turned their world upside down. It wasn't what anybody expected. In fact, you could call that first Christmas, the “Great Unexpected Christmas of All Time.”

Think about the story. God decides to intrude, big time, on the world and its brokenness and pain. Not from a distant, aloof heaven; not through us climbing a

mountain to meditate ourselves into another reality. No, the Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise decides to take the initiative, and come right here to us. Unexpected. And he decides to do so in the form of a man. No, wait, in the form of a baby. A vulnerable, tiny, baby. Nobody expected that.

Whom does God choose as the vessel of such a miracle? A queen? A movie star? A warrior princess? No, a young, vulnerable, poor, second-class citizen in occupied Israel – a nobody from nowhere named Mary. Not even her name was special; of the half-dozen or so women talked about at any length in the Gospels, at least three are named Mary. But that's who God picks. No one expected that either. Especially Mary.

Now Mary may be just a wee slip of a humble young lady, but she's no fool. She knows an unexpected reversal of expectations when she sees one. The song she sings – the very, very, very first Christmas carol - lets us know that loud and clear: *And Mary said:*

*“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”*

The proud? Scattered. The servant? Remembered. Rulers? Brought down. Humble? Lifted up. Rich? Empty. Hungry? Filled. You get the idea that she must have taught Jesus this song, because a lot of it gets into the Sermon on the Mount, another great song of The Unexpected.

You know the rest of the Christmas story. Where is the baby born? In a palace? A fortress? In luxury and safety and cleanliness and warmth? Nope – a poor town. A lonely hillside. A stable. The visitors? Shepherds and Wise Men From Away. Who gets there first? Smelly old shepherds. To whom do the angels sing the song of praise and peace? Shepherds again. The Wise Men – what do they do? They tell the homicidal maniac Herod that they're in his territory to visit the infant rival to

his throne. Wise? Not very. At least they dropped off some gifts before they beat their hasty retreat.

I could go on, and I often do, and I will, in weeks to come, but let's be content with these few examples to prove the point that the Christmas story has at its core The Unexpected, the principle of going completely against societal and cultural expectation. And what I'm going to propose to you today strikes right at the very beating core of our own societal expectation surrounding Christmas. Let me put it to you as clearly as I can: **Christmas is not about buying expensive presents for everyone you know.** Our North American societal expectation is precisely that, but the Christmas Story has nothing to do with spending big money on buying expensive presents for everyone you know. Nothing! Which, for many, is unexpected indeed.

This realisation hit a certain Canadian man pretty hard one year. I shared a bit of his story with you fifteen – fifteen! - Christmases ago:

Aiden Enns is a Mennonite on a mission. The founder of Buy Nothing Christmas is encouraging everyone, particularly spiritual people, to return to their roots this season -- and, instead of celebrating commercialism, mark the birth of a man who taught the wealthy to scale down their opulent lives.

Enns' mini-movement, which is drawing media attention from all over North America and Europe, says: "Instead of asking, 'What would Jesus do?' we ask 'What would Jesus give?'"

Buy Nothing Christmas is trying to change the way we do Christmas spending. Disturbingly, polls show one out of three North Americans actually throw Christmas gifts into the garbage, while the average North American spends six months paying off winter holiday credit-card debt. The Canadian average on gift spending is over \$1000 per adult. The week prior to Christmas, Visa alone records sales averaging half a billion dollars a day. That's just in Canada.

In the face of an advertising onslaught to get kids "needing" the latest gizmos and gadgets, Enns asks parents, especially those who are religious, to try to teach their children the value of a non-commercial Christmas. "You can have a special time without buying a lot of stuff." (from a Vancouver Sun article by Douglas Todd)

Enns and a group of Mennonite friends in Vancouver took out a full-page ad in Canadian Mennonite magazine that read, "If you think Christmas has gotten too commercialised, here's your chance to do nothing about it." They developed a

website and asked people to change their spending habits away from excessive consumption. They asked for submitted stories and ideas to give people alternatives to consumer-oriented Christmas shopping. They also invited people across Canada to join them in making Christmas less commercial. They advocated a Christian lifestyle that is “richer in meaning, smaller in impact upon the earth, and greater in giving to people less-privileged.” Which shouldn’t be an unexpected reversal on how we as Christians celebrate Christmas, but it is.

OK, so maybe you’re wondering what you can do in response. How can you mirror the true spirit of that first Christmas by giving the unexpected? Here are some suggestions from “Buy Nothing Christmas”:

- Choose a favourite book from your bookshelf and on the inside cover explain why you chose that title for that person.
- For elderly people in your life, research newspaper and magazine articles from their youth and present them in a creative fashion.
- Make a calendar with pictures of family members and scenery.
- Fill an old trunk or suitcase with fun clothing, hats and gaudy jewellery for little children to play dress-up.
- Give away a valued possession, along with a story detailing why you think it is right for them.
- Make a music CD or thumbdrive and choose songs that make you think of that person. Under each title, explain why you chose that song. If you don’t know how to make a CD or a thumbdrive, just make a list of the songs. They can download them themselves.
- Fill a basket with homemade goodies.
- Video interview your elderly parents about childhood memories, how they met etc., and give it to siblings or children.
- Give a gift that you traditionally received when you were a child, and a story about such a time.
- Have some fun with family, friends or co-workers by setting a \$5 price limit on gifts, and see who ends up with the best idea.
- Make a booklet of Christmas carols and recipes reflecting your family traditions, with space for others to add theirs as an ongoing keepsake.
- Here’s something new: Give something unusually extravagant to your minister (I added this one myself).

Don’t know what to give your children or grandchildren? Give them you! Give them your stories. Give them your faith. Give them your heart. Make a copy

of a favourite photograph, put it in a frame, and write a story on the back telling them why it is significant to you. Or choose a photo of your family together at Christmas, maybe when the kids were young, and talk about your memories of those days. Write about the 10 lessons you learned in your life, that you would most have them (or their children) know. Talk about a faith story – the time when God was very much with you in a difficult time – and why your faith is important to you now. For younger children, give them your time, with activities you can do together as a family. Give them a game you used to play when you were their age, and then play it with them. Open your hearts to your children, and to theirs.

And if you are blessed in that your parents are still living, the same ideas apply, with the added hint that nothing is more precious to a parent than a child sharing with them their time. Write out what you would most like your parents to know about you, about your heart, about the impact they have had on your life, of your most precious times together. How many funerals have I conducted where children spoke so wonderfully of their parents, only to wish their parents could have heard those words when still they were alive? So why wait? Deliver their eulogy now, while they can still enjoy it (Important Hint: it would be best at this point to call it a tribute, rather than a eulogy). And if your parents have gone to be with God, write out what you wish you could have said to them, write out your most significant memories of your parents, and give that as a gift to your own children. What a treasure that would be. Can you imagine if you had such a letter that your parents had written to theirs? Don't give them things. Give them you. Give them your heart.

Don't have time for such creativity? Of course, our own FoodGrains Christmas Cards make a tremendous difference in lives throughout the world. For just \$70, you can give a gift in honour of someone, which will provide food for a hungry family for a year. For \$30, a hungry person; or any amount, to help feed the hungry. Even a small gift, through the miracle of multiplication, can and will make a difference. And the person to whom you give the card will have the wonderful knowledge that in their name, people are receiving life-saving food, every day. That's a pretty good Christmas gift right there. "*He has filled the hungry with good things,*" sang Mary. This is your chance to join in.

Above all, and most importantly, familiarize yourself all over again with the Christmas story. Read the first few chapters of Matthew and Luke, and remember what it is – remember who it is - we actually are celebrating, and why. Want a great idea of what the grandkids can give to their grandparents? Have them read the Christmas story from the Bible to their grandparents. Have the children tell

their grandparents what the story means to them. Have them ask their grandparents about what it meant to them when they were little. And together, remember that the greatest gift ever given, while it did cost a life, didn't cost a dime. And along the way, bought salvation for the world. Christmas was never about big expensive gifts. Christmas was always about love. About giving, about sharing, about receiving, love.

Which is what Communion is about too. It is about God giving of himself, giving the gift of Jesus, the gift of God's love personified. It is about Jesus sharing that love through his words, his actions, through giving his life for us all. It is about us receiving that love in the form of simple bread and wine, gifts through which we are reminded of God's gift of love, of Jesus' gift of his life, gifts which we share with one another, joining us together with all those who share these same gifts, now and throughout time, all the way back to that night of Jesus and his friends, when he said the unexpected words: "This is my body. My blood. Do this in remembrance of me." Unexpected. But the greatest gift of all.

This Covid Christmas is an opportunity to get off the bandwagon of the thirty billion Canadian dollars of consumer spending at Christmas, the vast majority of which, I venture to say, was spent on things neither needed nor wanted. You can buy into the Unexpected nature of the original Christmas, you can buy into the very heart and life and message of Jesus, and touch someone's life not with pointless bling, but with caring, thoughtful love.

"My dear brothers and sisters," wrote James, *"don't be fooled about this. Everything good comes from God. Every perfect gift is from him."* Let's follow in those footsteps, and share the gift of love. Amen.