

Call to the Unexpected Servant

Isaiah 52:13-53:6 Matthew 2: 13-23

We've weathered the holiday season and come to a new year. But it's fair to ask which holiday season did we weather, and what new year have we embarked upon? I've read articles recently challenging our customary views.

Was it the Christmas season that had us queuing in lines and seeking parking spaces, attending Christmas parties of eating and drinking and maybe a bit of singing, hosting one of your own, even if only for family to gather, or pondering what to gift to the one who truly needs nothing, not even what your greatest imaginative thought could conjure? For many people, and indeed many Christians, this is what characterizes Christmas stresses.

Of course, the occasion of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth itself typically gets scant attention, much less causing us any stress, unless you're the musician for the Christmas Eve Lessons and Carols Communion Service. For those coming to the Christmas Eve service, it merely serves as a reminder that the clamor of holiday busy-ness is actually about the birth of the Savior, the Son of God and Man. The worship service becomes a justifying after-thought for many. All that went before gets defined as "preparations," as if those preparations had anything to do with Christmas, with the birth of the Lord.

It has been this way for all my life. I can't imagine it being any different. However, it does mock the notion that there is any denial of religion as an organized assault from some anti-religious social or political entity. We're the yuletide corrupters ourselves every single year. Like sheep without a shepherd, we all go astray, or like wolves in a pack, we all hunger for the prey of a great deal. If Jesus is the reason for the season, as the trite saying goes, then how do you explain what we always do to Christmas without fail?

The same could be said of the new year in a somewhat different sense. Being good churchgoers, you know that the liturgical new year started with the first Sunday of Advent. Like Jews who follow their own calendar, Christians might want to follow their own calendar. But we don't pay it much attention. After all, the coincidence of the first Sunday of Advent with the opening of the holiday shopping season totally negates the faith prospect with the commercial prospect. So Christians all over the nation hoisted a glass of good cheer to bid farewell to 2016 and welcome 2017, marking the calendrical definitions of the Romans who happen to be the same ones who crucified Jesus in a different era – a touch of irony, don't you think?

With corrupted Christmas and a secular New Year behind us, we ought to consider what the popular afterthought of Jesus, the servant of God, may be all about.

It's interesting that the Bible selections for Christmas typically focus on the prettier accounts in Luke, while the Sunday after Christmas switches gears to Matthew's dark tale of scheming intrigue and death squad violence. In Luke, God elevates the poor

over the rich - although it's impolite in some circles to note such revolutionary polemics in the hallowed Christmas story, while in Matthew, God elevates the powerless over the powerful – also a tad impolite in some circles to note such revolutionary polemics to folks who simply like to merge the three magi into Luke's pretty story.

Let's say that we've peeled back the gauzy layers of our artificial preferred interpretation. Then we should not be surprised to find that this servant of God arrives in an unexpected form to a rather unwelcome reception. Pretty babies from humble origins are delightful. Revolutionaries tend to be unexpected and unwelcome.

The Chosen One from God would be expected to be something like the heroic warrior David, ruddy, handsome, muscular, royal, and regal. Yet in several places Isaiah refers to just the opposite in his description of the Chosen One from God. Today's selection from Second Isaiah is known as chief among the "Suffering Servant" passages.

It begins with great expectations: *See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.* Well, we're thinking, this is great! I can't wait to hear about this Adonis of virtue and righteousness, of his prosperity and success, and his muscular power and model of perfection. *Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals* Wait, what just happened there? Where is the guy, the Chosen One, the one who goes beyond all expectations?

It just gets worse. *For [God] grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account.* This isn't Superman; it's the Hunchback. This isn't Beauty; it's the Beast. This is all wrong, dashing our hopes for a savior like we thought. What has God done? How could God get it so wrong?

Yet this horrid figure, maligned and rejected – and deservedly so, it would seem – is fulfilling God's sacred purpose, not our personal desires and expectations. We might find the servant of God offensive, and we should not be surprised. God is the Sacred Other, not the mirror of our desires at all.

Isaiah has in mind a specific person; he keeps returning to this Suffering Servant imagery. Yet we have no idea who that historical person might have been. Since Second Isaiah is the one who reveals the first messiah from God, Cyrus the Great of Persia, it seems curious that he's also occupied with this other servant of God, the one despised and rejected, scorned and scourged, who bears the sins of God's people like a sacrificial lamb.

As the passage continues: *For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked, and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

Even in death, the servant is mocked - *his grave with the wicked, and his tomb with the rich* – as his life ends in sinful injustice.

Only God can make his life worthy of its calling in service, returning us to the soaring words of the opening: *Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.* In self-sacrifice aligned with sacred purpose, God esteems the Chosen One as great while the world rejects him.

With Jesus being so well accepted, among Christians certainly, we might find little resemblance to the Savior whose birth gets proclaimed at Christmas. Yes, the selection from Second Isaiah is typically read on Good Friday, a time when we see Jesus amid his worst circumstances, we might find little application of this passage otherwise.

Yet the unexpected and also unwelcome servant is what characterizes Matthew's tense account of the nativity. The real world nature of Matthew's story is as disturbing as Luke's version is comforting.

Matthew's tale of danger and intrigue is key to Epiphany, the revealing of the Promised One of God to the world. It reflects the terrible events at the end of Jesus' earthly life in the beginning of the story with his birth. Dark and ominous themes of brutal aggression and the wanton use of power surround Matthew's account.

In Matthew, the birth of the Promised One of God is not greeted with glad songs and joyful celebration. There is no choir of angels, no delirious shepherds shouting for joy, and no time for mother Mary to treasure any fond memories. None of that. The birth of the Promised One of God is simply seen as a threat to those in power.

Our selection today skips over any niceties about the gift-bearing Magi, whose gifts are fit for royalty, yet fit the dark context of events. Once the Magi depart, an angel returns to the holy family, to Joseph in particular. The angel doesn't bring good news. It's time to run, to flee and get all the way to Egypt because there is no safety to be found anywhere near Judea where King Herod may find them.

The brute exercise of the power of death is used by tyrants to achieve a desired goal. Persecution and execution is the tool of tyrants who have no regard for anything but their own power, and who will use the most evil and unjust tactics to achieve their desired end. And there will be people who will applaud them, because the end justifies the means, and surely those who were dealt with so harshly deserved what they got. It happens all the time.

God works in opposite fashion through Jesus. God incarnates love in order to empower and unify, challenging agendas of injustice and unrighteousness. But as God acts to bring a new order and a new way into the world through this new intervention, it comes into immediate conflict with worldly powers and authorities who only want their

agenda to be kept secure. These worldly powers will act with vicious resolve to maintain their standing.

Herod's soldiers arrive too late. The magi are gone and the whereabouts of this family and its child-king is unknown. Furious, Herod demands the slaughter of every male child under 2 years old in the region around Bethlehem. It is no coincidence that a dramatic saving of a baby, who would be revealed as God's chosen, from a murderous imperial decree appears both here and in the story of Moses. Remember Pharaoh's decree against the Hebrew babies, and Moses being saved in the basket? Yes, a mere child can be a threat to tyrant.

While there is no historical record of this particular slaughter in Bethlehem, it is fully in line with Herod's record of ruthlessness in other purges and persecutions in order to silence potential opponents and cow the populace into submission with terrorizing death squads.

Then the story goes fast forward to the death of Herod. The angelic messenger comes again to Joseph in Egypt, advising that it's now time to return. But Herod's designated heir, his son Archelaus, wastes no time in establishing his reputation, carrying out a brutal massacre right after his father's funeral. Archelaus was totally incompetent. Never granted the title of king by Caesar Augustus, Archelaus was tolerated for 10 years before being banished. Archelaus was picking up where his father left off. Counseled in a dream, Joseph and family become fugitives and refugees once again and journey to the more remote and relatively safer region of Galilee, a home for both sanctuary and rebellion.

The birth of this child as the Chosen One for God's people is again not how the action of God was expected to come about. The One who would be seen as Lord, Son of God and Son of Man immediately challenges the authorities of the world, making this unwelcome newcomer, babe that he is, the focus of an imperial manhunt.

Unexpected, unwanted, and unwelcome, that is the Chosen One, the servant of God who fulfills God's promise by faithfully serving God's will.

We shouldn't be surprised that the world has chosen to pass over the difficult messages of the good news for a society immersed in commercialism and materialism, the word of spirituality and new life that defies rulers and powers with faithfulness to no earthly ruler or power, reserving that obedience to God and the Lord's Kingdom alone.

Unexpected, unwanted, and unwelcome is still how the world today receives the Chosen One from God when you're honest about it. The question for the church and for the faithful is whether the unexpected can gain our attention, the unwanted can receive our acceptance, and the unwelcome can find at least a refuge, a sanctuary, or maybe even a home among the ones who call him Lord and Savior.