

It Won't Be WHERE You Expect

Luke 3:7-18

INTRODUCTION

George Washington slept in a lot of places.

- According to my good friend Google, there are 230 bronze historical markers celebrating the fact that the Father of our Country actually had time to sleep somewhere.
- According to this same Google source, only three of those places are in Ohio:
 - One in Meigs County, Belmont County and Washington County, all of which are located near the Ohio River
- Before I did this search, I was certain George had slept at the Golden Lamb in Lebanon, but that one didn't make the list ... and who am I to question Google?

Where things happen is a big deal!

- Karen and I take vacations to see where things happened. You probably do too.

I have never been to Kitty Hawk, NC, but this past week a whole lot of people traveled there. Kitty Hawk is the site of the first powered, controlled flight of a heavier-than-air flying machine. Tuesday was the 121st anniversary of Orville Wright's 12 second accomplishment.

- 12 seconds, and people still go there. Why? Because something really important happened in that place.

As you know by now, our focus during these weeks of Advent is on the expectations people bring to the story about the coming Messiah, so we are borrowing the title of a great work of English literature as our theme: "Great Expectations."

- As I shared two weeks ago when I began this series of sermons, it has seemed to me that many of the Scriptures we have been reading this fall – along with many of the Scriptures we will read this month and in the months ahead – describe the faulty expectations of the Jewish people as they waited for the coming Messiah.
- What they expected was different from what they got.

And that is the core reason why the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. He was not what they expected. He didn't meet their GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

That realization as I studied the Scriptures also got me thinking about my own expectations about God and my relationship to Him. I asked myself:

Where have my Great Expectations kept me from seeing what God is actually doing? What do I miss because I am expecting something else?

In the previous three Sundays of this series, we have talked about how the working of God generally does not happen:

- The WAY we expect
- Or through WHO we expect
- Or with the WORDS you expect

This morning, we focus on the WHERE. It won't be WHERE you expect. Our three readings today offer three illustrations:

WHERE #1: IN BETHLEHEM

Look how Bethlehem is described in Micah 5:2:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah ... (Micah 5:2)

One of the smallest villages in the smallest of the twelve tribes of Israel. Who but God would have ever picked Bethlehem?

One commentator said:

It was little among the thousands of Judah, not considerable either for the number of the inhabitants or the figure they made; it had nothing in it worthy to have this honor put upon it.

Before 1903, who would have ever expected Kitty Hawk to become an important location for anything. According to the National Park Service, Kitty Hawk offered only three things before the arrival of the Wright Brothers: wind, sand and isolation. But, like Bethlehem, it made history.

It's true that Bethlehem was David's hometown, but that was hundreds of years before Micah's prophecy. At the time of this prophecy Bethlehem was inconsequential. It was not at all where you would expect God to do something great. Having the Messiah born there was GREATLY UNEXPECTED.

WHERE #2: ON A CROSS

Our second reading provides the second example. Look Hebrews 10:

First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:8-10)

Ever since they had been formed as a nation, the people of Israel had been commanded and conditioned to offer sacrifices on the altar at the Temple as a way of receiving the forgiveness of God for the sins they had committed.

- Sometimes the sacrifice was an animal like a lamb or bull.
- Sometimes it was a specific amount of grain.

But the common denominator in every act of repentance and forgiveness was that they – that is, the people who sinned – had to sacrifice something they owned to acquire their forgiveness. Don't miss this point:

My sin costs ME!

Not you. Not my parents. Not my community. Not my government. And certainly not my God. It cost ME. Ezekiel the prophet stated the principle clearly:

The one who sins is the one who will die. (Ezekiel 18:4)

That's the rule. That's what was expected.

I don't know how things were at your house, but when I was growing up the family rule was "You break it. You buy it." If my brother were playing ball, and broke a neighbor's window, we had to pay for it. If we broke it, we had to pay for it.

- Karen will tell you that to this day, I don't touch things when I go into a store.
 - I get very nervous if the aisles are too close, and I'm not exaggerating.
 - Do you want to see me panic? Put me in the Fine China department with children or with any adult who has to touch something in order to see it!

The rule is clear. You break it. You buy it. You sin. You die.

Throughout all of their history, the Jews knew that if they committed the sin, they had to provide the sacrifice. They had to take that lamb, drive to Jerusalem and offer the sacrifice on the Great Altar in the Temple. That was the expectation.

But then Jesus came. When Jesus made His first public appearance John the Baptist called him:

The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

That's unexpected. And not only does He unexpectedly take away my sin, but He also doesn't do it on the altar in the Temple of Jerusalem. He does it on a cross just outside the city gates. The words of Hebrews are completely UNEXPECTED:

We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

No one expected that. We still struggle with it today.

- Some people think they have to do something in order to have a relationship with Jesus. You break it. You buy it. It can't be free and easy. But it is. It's totally UNEXPECTED.

WHERE #3: INSIDE FAITHFUL PEOPLE

The third "where" is in Luke 1:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

Two women. One very young and one very old. Both pregnant with babies that are part of God's divine plan. In the fulness of time ...

- Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist
- Mary will give birth to Jesus

Elizabeth's pregnancy was a cause for celebration. She and her husband Zechariah had been trying to have a baby for years. So it was clear that God was at work in her. Unexpected? Yes! But there was no other explanation. God was doing something.

- By contrast,, Mary's pregnancy was scandalous. She wasn't married. No one expected that either. Yet the same God who was at work in Elizabeth was also at work in the same way in Mary's life too.

We don't know what Elizabeth's reaction was to the news she was going to get pregnant. The Scriptures don't record that.

- But we do know her husband's reaction. He didn't believe it. Who could blame him? It was unexpected.

Joseph didn't believe it either at first. These men had a problem accepting that God would do something unexpected inside the women they loved.

But the God who works in unexpected villages and on Roman crosses also works inside faithful people like Mary and Elizabeth.

APPLICATION

There is actually a fourth "where" – one that follows "Where #3." And it is the most unexpected one of them all. Are you ready? The God of the universe:

The God who works in GREAT and UNEXPECTED ways in villages and on crosses also wants to work inside you and me.

Earlier this month our second reading included a wonderful verse that reads like this:

... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

When you and I began to walk in faith with Jesus -- God started His work in us.

- Whether that starting point was when you were a baby and were baptized
- Or whether your faith life didn't begin until you were older

God began what the Philippians text calls a GOOD WORK and as long as you are breathing, He continues to work on your insides.

Day by day, moment by moment, the Holy Spirit is chipping away, renovating your character, and transforming you more and more into the image of Christ.

A visitor to an art museum watched in wonder as the master sculptor carefully chipped away at the huge granite rock before him. He finally asked the sculptor to explain what he was doing. The sculptor replied, "There's an angel inside there, and I am trying to set him free."

God works in you day by day to release you from everything that holds you captive and set you free to be what He created you to be.

Why would God work in us? Of all the things God might do with His time, why us? And yet that is precisely why He came. In a very real sense ...

Christmas is all about you.

God does amazing things in ME. That's the most unexpected of them

Amen.