

It Won't Be Who You Expect

Luke 3:1-6

INTRODUCTION

It was an annual tradition for this little rural community in the southwest corner of Indiana. Every year on the Sunday before Christmas the children of the community would come together at the Methodist Church to put on their traditional nativity pageant. It had been the same script every year for many years, so all the adults could recite the show by heart. Many of them had been in the play themselves when they were younger.

One of the current children was a lively ten-year-old boy who had managed to create a disaster in every Christmas play he had been in. His name was Barry.

- One year his angel wings caught fire. That one nearly burned the church down.
- The next year as Herod the Great, he jumped up from his throne and – in his usual clumsy way – jerked the carpet out from under three Wise men and dumped them on their heads.

Some of the other children and even some of their parents begged the director to not let Barry ruin another play: "Please," they said, "can't you just leave Barry out this year?"

- But the director could not reject the little boy who tried his best and loved Jesus with all his heart – even if he was a little clumsy.
- She was able to convince the children that Barry could not do any real damage by playing the role of the innkeeper in Bethlehem. He would simply open and close a door and speak one short line.
- Barry made it perfectly through all rehearsals. All, it seemed, was well.

Finally that Sunday night came when mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends, strangers and the whole community gathered in hushed silence on those hard wooden pews in the tiny sanctuary to relive once again the Christmas story.

When his time came, Barry opened the door of the inn and looked straight into the face of Mary and Joseph. Mary sat very sad and pale on a little donkey, which they never used in any of the rehearsals. They also had never used the fan that blew cold air through door and whipped the thin cloak of Mary. But Barry came through! He said his one and only line with professional emphasis and timing: "Begone, I have no room for the likes of you!" And with that Mary and Joseph turned sadly away into the cold night.

But Barry was into the real spirit and meaning of the play. The people in the front row could see the tears well up in his eyes and they saw his lips begin to tremble ... "Wait!" Barry's shout came like a thunderclap. Every heart in the room stopped! What was going on? That word was not in the script of the familiar Christmas story.

Then Barry finished it: "Wait! You can have my room!"

Bedlam broke loose. Children cried. Parents were outraged. Pandemonium reigned. Barry had "ruined" another Christmas play. But the discerning director quieted the crowd, dried Barry's tears as well as her own and said, "Maybe God has spoken to all of

us through Barry tonight. Maybe he was the real messenger after all, because the dear Christ-child can only enter into those hearts who are willing to make room for him."

God often speaks to us through unexpected people.

People like ... Barry. Or people like John the Baptist, for example. What an unexpected messenger he was! The text we read in Malachi today predicts the coming of a guy like John and the words Luke's Gospel quotes from the prophecy in Isaiah point to John as well. So they should have expected him. But this guy – wow – he was something else, nothing like they had pictured. I mean, look how he is described Matthew's Gospel:

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. (Matthew 3:4)

By today's standards – and even by the standards of people in Biblical times – John was an oddball! Not at all what anyone expected! The one coming to announce the Messiah should have class and dignity. He shouldn't be weird! And yet ... God unexpectedly spoke through John.

"Great Expectations" is our theme for this year's Advent season. As I shared last Sunday morning 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. They had a specific picture of what the Messiah would look like, and what He would do, and how He would act. Quite simply Jesus did not match the picture. He didn't meet their GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

But that also got me thinking about my own expectations about God and my relationship to Him. I asked myself: Where have my GREAT EXPECTATIONS caused me to be like the Jews of old? In other words:

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

That brings me to this truth for our consideration this morning:

Sometimes we become so busy with life that we fail to hear the voice of God as He speaks through unexpected messengers.

Maybe we don't hear what God says through unexpected people because ...

#1: WE DON'T LIKE THE MESSAGE THEY BRING

John's message was pretty confrontational. Our Gospel text from Luke describes it as:

... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)

In Matthew John calls members of his congregation a brood of vipers:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! (Matthew 3:7)

Those are not endearing messages.

Our grandson Gabriel had never been to the Circleville Pumpkin festival, and Karen and I hadn't been there for years either, so we took him this fall. Next to the lot where we parked our car was a street preacher, complete with a megaphone in one hand and a Bible in the other. He wasn't dressed in camel's hair, but like John, he was calling everyone to repent. No one stopped to listen. The line was much longer at the pumpkin donut booth. What the donut booth had was more enticing.

I will admit I didn't stop either. And I happen to agree with the content of the message. I think everyone needs to repent of their sins and get their hearts right with God. My issue was how the message was delivered. I even thought to myself, "I wonder if this guy is actually making a difference?" The expected answer was "No."

Whether it is the content or how it is delivered, the message itself sometimes keeps us from hearing what God wants to say.

- "I don't want to hear that," we might say.

The Apostle Paul warns a young pastor to keep on giving the message of God even if it is not well received because, he says:

... the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

The world today, I think, is far more interested in hearing about God's love and forgiveness than it is about God's holiness and about the spiritual warfare that comes with following Jesus.

- Tell me what I want to hear, not what I need to hear!

I wonder if God is using unexpected people to try to communicate something to me, but I'm ignoring it ... because it's not the message I want hear from God.

Maybe we don't hear God speak because ...

#2: WE WANT IT NOW

I don't want God to tell me something that isn't going to happen for a long time. I need a message for today – for the problems I'm facing right now. John's message was one of preparation:

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. (Luke 3:4)

John made it clear that his job was to tell people to "get ready." Several times he was asked by the crowds that heard him preach if he was the Messiah that they had been waiting for.

"Are you the Messiah?" He answered, "No... I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord.'" (John 1:21-23)

One of the passages of Scripture that is frequently used at wedding service is Jeremiah 29:11.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Great verse. You don't mind a message like that on your wedding day, because that day is all about the future. But if your problem is right now, God's future plans can be hard to hear.

- The Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah for thousands of years.
- Rome was oppressing them right now.
- And John was proclaiming: "The Messiah is coming."
- The words of Isaiah were more than 700 years old. They didn't want "He's coming" messages. They wanted "He's here" messages.

As I was searching for a good way to illustrate this point, I googled "I want my prayers answered now" just to see what might come up.

- The first item returned to me was titled:

11 Proven Ways to Get Your Answered Quickly

I didn't give the article any more time than I gave that street preacher in Circleville, because I know that God moves on His own schedule, not mine. Plus that is next week's sermon.

But truthfully, which word from the Lord would you rather hear? "11 Proven Ways" or "I will be there soon?"

APPLICATION

1 Kings 19 tells a familiar story about God speaking to the prophet Elijah during one of his times of deep stress. Elijah expected to hear God in a dramatic fashion: whirlwind,

earthquake or fire. But it didn't happen that way. Instead God spoke in a gentle whisper.

- We have come to expect that. We are trained as Christians to listen for God in big dramatic ways or in gentle whispers.
- We listen for God when we read the Bible, or sing a hymn, or hear a sermon.
- We hear God in the Christmas carols that play from church steeples or on department store PA systems.
- We expect all of that – and if God does speak in those ways, we probably hear it.

But it is the unexpected ways that we miss.

- We miss God speaking through little Barry in the Christmas pageant.
- Or in through the clamoring crowds at the mall.
- Or through quiet people or lonely people.

Hmmm ... I wonder if God ever speaks through immigrant people, or homeless people.

- Do you suppose we might hear His voice through them?

I am fully convinced that God continues to speak to me today. I also convinced that I don't always hear what He wants to say.

And when I don't, it is usually because it came in an unexpected way through unexpected people. What about you?

Amen.