

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Matthew 1:18-25
Sunday, December 18, 2016

Finding the unexpected in scripture

1. Bonnie and I recently decided that now that the major stress is gone from our lives, we need to break the bad eating habits that had begun as stress eating. I got her a book and a cook book that outlined a healthy eating lifestyle and it has done wonders already, in just the first week, to help us regain control of our lives.
 - a. The issue with “dieting” is expectations. We all want to lose weight by doing some trick fad that will allow us to eat all we want, sit on our couch, and have the pounds just melt away. Are those reasonable expectations?
 - b. With dieting, though, we don’t always have higher expectations than we should. Often we expect the worst. In Bonnie’s new cookbook which is about promoting healthy eating and weight loss, there is a recipe for cheeseburger pie. It is exactly what it sounds like. And it is excellent. We had such low expectations for it that we were very pleasantly surprised. Bonnie went to the forums for the cookbook and others had the exact same response.
2. Last week I talked about the importance of having the proper expectations. At times it was a dismal picture, because I talked about how proper expectations for the Christian should be rejection by the world, because they reject the God we serve. However, there is also a beautiful arc to God’s plan that is, time and time again, full of the unexpected.
3. I believe that most of the scriptural accounts we have of Jesus’ life defy expectation. I don’t think many believed that the Messiah would be born the son of a carpenter. They expected that he would be the son of a great king. They wouldn’t have expected him to have the humble and anonymous origins that he had. And they wouldn’t have expected that he would be born of a virgin.
4. If you want to talk about expectations- every husband-to-be has the right to expect that his wife won’t become pregnant prior to the wedding when they have not *known* each other. Yet, here is Mary, betrothed to Joseph, becoming pregnant “by the power of the Holy Spirit.” If I was Joseph, I wouldn’t find that to be the most descriptive or persuasive argument. This sounds like a first century tale of infidelity and intrigue; not the narrative of the conception of the Savior of the world.

The unexpected faithfulness of Joseph

1. Joseph, the epitome of a good man, decided that he would divorce Mary quietly. This was prior to their formal marriage, but a betrothal was in place, and that was a legally binding contract that would require a divorce to escape from. Joseph didn’t want to embarrass Mary. He just didn’t like that she had seemingly broken the covenant bond they were supposed to have.
2. Again, on the theme of expectations, had Joseph left Mary, no one would have blamed him. At least not from an earthly standpoint. God himself recognized this, which is why he sent an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream assuring him that Mary had been faithful and that this child was truly conceived by the Holy Spirit.
 - a. Being the exact opposite of what Joseph (and everyone else) would have expected, this child born of a virgin, conceived prior to a formal marriage would change the world. The angel told Joseph, “She will bear a son, and you shall call

his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus means “God saves.” Thus, these words from the angel told Joseph exactly who this son was and what his importance would be. Through this son, which would be his son by law, though not by blood, God would save his people from their sins.

- b. We all expect great things of our children. How many expect their children to be the savior of all mankind?
3. Joseph obeyed what the angel told him, wed Mary, and raised Jesus as his own son. He was truly a good man.
 - a. The world could use some more men like him.

God’s power through the unexpected

1. This is just the beginning of an incredible narrative of Jesus’ life; a life (and following) full of the unexpected. What do we learn from this pre-birth account? We learn that God works through ways we could never imagine.
2. What seems like foolishness to the world is the result of the wisdom of God.
 - a. A child conceived of a virgin, raised by a working-class father, never holding an earthly throne, yet being the King of heaven and earth. God does things his own way.
3. First and foremost, we don’t want to lose sight of the fact that this is about Jesus and what God did for the world through him in giving him as a sacrifice for our sins.
4. But it should also provide us comfort and motivation when thinking about our own lives. We are often in the midst of things that make no sense and we can’t see where God is present in it. Don’t you think that Joseph felt the exact same way? The narrative of scripture is always shortened, meaning that we can read in five minutes what might have taken days or weeks. How long do you think Joseph sat in anger and sorrow, heart-broken at the thought that his betrothed had been unfaithful? How often have you, in the midst of a bad or confusing situation, reacted similarly?
 - a. We have no idea what God intends to do with these things. At the risk of beating a dead horse, I use the inspiration of Zach. He and his family went through tremendous difficulty, anger, sorrow, acceptance that he wasn’t going to live, uncertainty as to why it was all happening, and on and on.
 - b. Yet it was this very ordeal that brought Zach to the Lord, that began to really change Mark’s heart, that turned Mark into a praying evangelist at Mott’s, and that has touched so many other lives for the glory of God.
 - c. We just don’t know.
5. So, yes, while we need to temper our expectations in some areas- such as having any easy life because of following the Lord; at the same time, we should never lower our expectations about the goodness, mercy, wisdom, or love of our heavenly Father. As Romans 8:28 tells us, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”
6. We can’t always see it. We don’t always know it. We may not always even believe it. But if anything is certain about God, it is that he has both the power and the desire to defy our expectations to make his love known to us.