

## Expecting the Unexpected

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Matthew 24:36-44

Many of us who saw Rita last Sunday expected she would soon give birth. In fact, we couldn't imagine that she could hang on much longer. Indeed, on Monday evening the process began and early Thanksgiving morning Katya Elisabeth was born, at home.

Katya was waited for expectantly. And Rita and Phil were not disappointed. Thankfully, Rita and Phil had prepared themselves physically, mentally and spiritually. Having two midwives, a birthing assistant and Rita's two sisters to work with them turned out to be a good plan as they didn't expect Katya to take 2½ days to make her appearance.

Our Advent theme this year is the unexpected hour. As regulars here on Sunday mornings, we have come to expect this hour of worship, and we may have expectations for the hour. This season we are invited to be open and alert for what we may not expect — not only in this hour but also throughout the days and weeks of Advent. What might we find as we worship, work, wonder and sit in silence? How can we be alert to the promise and possibilities of the Holy One in the world?

There is a second understanding of the unexpected hour, right out of the Matthew text for the day. God is at work in the world and we never know what that might look like. It could be like it was during the days of Noah when people

were living high and eating well. They didn't notice what was coming until they were unexpectedly swallowed up by the floodwaters.

Matthew 24 goes on to give various examples of what it means to be alert, to be prepared for God's presence in the world. Another scenario says we must keep awake, always on guard. *If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, the owner would have stayed awake and would not have allowed the house to be broken into.*

As someone who recently had my vehicle stolen while I was asleep, I do not find it comforting to have God compared to a thief lurking in the shadows. Perhaps this illustration worked in Matthew's community, but in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century context where thieves represent fear and violation of personal space I suspect I am not the only one unnerved by this metaphor.

For me, a more helpful view on staying awake and alert is this thought from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century German mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg:

*The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw — all things in God and God in all things.*

To live with this kind of alertness, or wakefulness means that yesterday I saw God in the power and endurance of Rita's body giving birth. I saw God in baby Katya, delicate, wide-eyed and practically helpless. I saw the Spirit in the strong support and tender comfort of Phil as a partner and father. I saw holiness in the connection that Rita's sisters had with each other, with Rita, with Katya and with Phil, the lone man in a circle of women.

I have heard a number of you speak of seeing God in nature, in the changing seasons, in the sight and sound of geese overhead. Perhaps we experience God in the chill wind and the hot tea that warms us.

If we, like Mechtild, see God in all things is it possible to see God lurking in the shadows? Is there any potential in this metaphor of thief? We are taught to be alert to those things and people that frighten us. But what if we are alert not only to fear but to the possibility that there is “that of God” — as Quakers say — even in the thief?

We are told that Jesus talked to the man hanging next to him on the cross. *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* Jesus saw that of God, even the possibility of the reign of God, in the thief. (This doesn’t mean I am yet comfortable with this metaphor of God as stealthy thief. But Mechtild’s spiritual awakening to see “all things in God and God in all things” does open up new challenges and possibilities.)

During this season when we watch with Mechtild and the gospel writer for the coming of God, it is easy to let our guard down since we already know the story. No surprises, the in-breaking of God comes to us in a baby and it literally did for me yesterday. But this is precisely why we have to keep alert, because we think we know the story. We think we know the ending, but Matthew is quite clear that no one knows but God.

The Hebrew scriptures this morning give us something quite different. Psalm 122 and Isaiah 2 invite us not to the birth of a baby, but to a dream and it

is not a baby dream. Isaiah and the psalmist give us a full-grown vision of people from all nations joining together to enter God's house.

The vision of unity and peace, of all nations joining together to cultivate peace instead of warfare seems too good to be true. It is a vision that seems an imaginary prospect yet Jews and Christians have held onto this vision for thousands of years.

Ten days ago Keith Swartzendruber and I flew to Kansas City. It is not quite the mountain of the Lord, but the way those Mennonites were flocking to the Hyatt Place hotel you would have thought there was something holy about the place.

Keith and I attended an urban leaders summit where we heard the results of a listening tour of Mennonites churches, leaders and ministries in the U.S. Three people visited 18 cities from January to September 2010 listening to the stories of urban Mennonites. As participants in the study, Keith and I were invited to the summit to hear the report and help formulate the final recommendations to Mennonite Church USA.

I was excited about attending the summit. I was tired after a couple of intense weeks so I decided to think of the trip as a short vacation. However, by the time we were in the air I remembered that this would not be a mid-week get-away. So the last half hour to Kansas City I prayed — to be open, to be softened and be ready to meet new people and listen. Miracles still happen. It was a marvelous few days. We worked hard at listening and sharing, and I got to sleep in a king size bed.

There are some amazing people across Mennonite Church USA. We heard blessings and pain, surprises and suspicion. We heard stories of congregations with so much diversity they wonder if they can hold it all together. We heard about a group that tried mega-church evangelicalism and has decided that being part of Mennonite Church USA is what they want, despite all our inadequacies.

We experienced a wee bit of the diversity that is the urban Mennonite Church. As a group of 35 in Kansas City, we did not come close to fulfilling Isaiah's vision of people from all nations. But I must say I was pleased that the number of plowshares definitely outnumbered the swords.

If Isaiah's vision is also our vision, it still seems like a dream: working and worshipping day to day across understandings and experiences that differ by culture, ethnicity, theology, education, economics and sexuality. Some of those gathered said maybe the only way to hold so many kinds of diversity is not in the congregation but in a conference. Others said that is just one more excuse for those in power to hold onto it. There was the sense that though we do not agree on everything as leaders in the Mennonite Church we still hold onto Isaiah's vision with hope for the future.

I came home unexpectedly energized by the possibilities of working with other urban leaders and expanding what it means to be Mennonite. I was inspired by the strong city-by-city messages that come through in the report and recommendations. I was surprised by the report's unflinching recognition that the

future of the Mennonite Church is “tied to the health and vitality of our urban sisters and brothers.” (See [urbanmennonite.org](http://urbanmennonite.org) for the full report.)

So where does this leave us, we who are alert to visions, babies and thieves? In this season of expectation we are encouraged to begin with silence. Across the church in the U.S. and Canada, Mennonites are experimenting with silence this advent as a way to become alert to the unexpected.

For some of us practicing these few minutes of silence each week will seem almost as impossible as Isaiah’s vision of all nations streaming to God’s mountain. For others, the silence comes as welcome relief from the noise of the season and our busy lives.

Wherever you find yourself on that continuum I encourage us all to try the silence. We who like to do things right may have high expectations for what we should experience in the silence. There might be echoes of our own thoughts, pleasant or not so. There may be an amazing message from the Spirit such as Mechtild had. Or we may hear nothing more than our own inhalations and exhalations. That is enough, the holy breath of God in each and every body.

In this season of expectation, let us be alert. *Let us be ready — for the Promised One is coming at an unexpected hour.*