

Unexpected

November 30, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Isaiah 2:2-4; Matthew 24:36-44

Last week, Mike preached on one 266-word run-on sentence from the book of Colossians, and summarized it as this: “In Jesus, we already know how everything turns out, and thus we can live accordingly in the world today. We know what’s going to happen, so we can live in that confidence that our faith provides.”

Well, now we turn the calendar page to a new liturgical year, to Advent, the four Sundays that prepare us for Christmas. The lectionary texts basically start over, not from the birth of Jesus, but from its prelude. Each year, it’s the same Advent readings, the same familiar stories, but each new year is never the same. Because Christmas is all about the unexpected.

Christmas is my favorite holiday. I love the story, the light in the darkness, the silent, holy nights, the freshly falling snow, the fires in the fireplace, the gatherings of friends and family, the gifts, the traditions and recipes passed on from generation to generation, and the new traditions that we incorporate along the way.

In my own family, my mother was a prolific needlepointer, making beautiful needlepointed stockings, as well as the figures of a creche scene. She was always working on one project or another. And she was also someone who planned ahead. After my brother and I and my three cousins were all launched into our adult lives, she decided she would make needlepoint ornaments for us all -- for her father, for my brother and me, for my aunt and uncle and cousins -- eight identical ornaments. Every day and every evening, she would sit with her feet up, stitching. I remember she said to my dad, my intellectual computer engineer father, “Bill, you need a craft!”

So, when the Christmas package arrived in the mail from Minnesota that year, I opened a wonderful needlepoint ornament from mom, and then ... a homemade beeswax Santa from dad. He had a craft! I could picture him at his workbench, carefully pouring the melted

beeswax into the mold, and waiting patiently for it to solidify, smoothing the edges. Repeating eight times. The next year, another ornament, and another beeswax Santa. The following year, the same. I was developing a collection!

So, the fourth year, with three needlepoint ornaments hung on the tree, and my trio of beeswax Santas on display, I opened my parents' now-expected Christmas gifts. First, the 1992 edition of Mom's needlepoint ornament, and then ... I still remember the feeling of that entirely unexpected gift: a hand-carved, hand-painted wooden Santa. And thus began a tradition that lasted 18 years. Dad was travelling a lot for work, and would bring his chisels and carving knives on the airplane to work on his craft. And from those blocks of balsa wood, each year, a new version of Santa would emerge. Now every year, the eighteen Santas adorn our mantle, and the eighteen ornaments hang on the tree, a Christmas tradition that reminds me not only of the love of my parents, but also of the delight in the unexpected origin of the first of dad's Santas.

This sense of the unexpected is at the heart of our Christmas story and traditions. Why else would we wrap our gifts? Each year, we think we know what will happen when we read the familiar story. And yet ... those moments come when we notice something new, or connect an element of the story with our own life's experience, it is then that the unexpected insights give new meaning and new life to our Christmas memories and traditions.

The biblical stories about Jesus didn't start out with a Christmas narrative. The earliest writings were Paul's letters, written after Paul had been travelling for a couple of decades after Jesus' death. He and the first generation of followers of Jesus were concerned about his life and death and about how God had raised Jesus after his death. They wanted to know how to follow in his ways and live the life that he taught. In fact, Paul mentions Jesus' origin only briefly, and only two times.¹ In Galatians, his earliest letter, he says that Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the law."² Seven years later, writing to the Romans, Paul says that Jesus was "descended from David."³

¹ With thanks to John Shelby Spong for his 1992 book, *Born of a Woman*.

² Galatians 4:4

³ Romans 1:3

It wasn't until the next generation that people began to wonder about Jesus' origin. It's usually not until someone has made an impact in the world that the general public becomes interested in where they came from. The house where a president was born isn't a landmark until after the baby grows up to be president. People don't wonder about a six-year-old soccer player's coach until that child grows up to play on the national team. It's the same for a gifted musician or a talented actor or even a notorious criminal. It isn't until after their impact in the world becomes known that we go back and search out their origins. We look for some clues in their origin stories, and wonder where our next leaders and prophets and poets will come from. It was like that for Jesus, too. After the impact of his ministry continued to grow in the first-century world, the question of where Jesus came from became more important. What had Paul meant when he said that Jesus was "descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead?"⁴ The idea of incarnation was prevalent in the stories of the Greek and Roman gods, who often took on a human form and descended to earth to mingle with the mortals. So as the stories of Jesus began circulating in the Greek and Roman worlds, it's not surprising that these ideas interacted with the Christian story. Was Jesus a god? He worked miracles and cast out demons. Was Jesus a king? He taught with authority and led the people. Where did Jesus come from?

The gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John were written later than Paul's letters, towards the end of the first century, for the second and third generations of followers. The earliest gospel is Mark's, in the very late 60s. He begins with John the Baptist and a 30-year-old Jesus. There's no birth story, although we do have a few hints of significant tension between Jesus and his family. Early on, in the third chapter, just after Jesus appointed his disciples, he went home. It was then that Mark notes that Jesus rejected his family ("Who are my mother and brothers?") and says that "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."⁵

⁴ Romans 1:3-4

⁵ Mark 3:35

So that's what we have up until Matthew and Luke sit down to pull together their gospels in the 80s. Matthew and Luke wrote to two different, specific, second-generation audiences, and because of that, they included significantly different birth narratives. If you read the two stories one at a time, you'll notice that Luke tells the story through Mary and the women, a manger, and the lowly shepherds. Matthew tells the story through Joseph and his dreams, echoing another Joseph, the son of Jacob who also had vivid dreams. Mary's Magnificat is only in Luke. The magi and the star and the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are only in Matthew. In Matthew, the angel of the Lord speaks to Joseph. In Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary. We expect the details of the story that most all of us have grown up with to be all in one place, but they're not. When we read them independently, unexpected themes emerge.

As we begin this new liturgical year today, we turn to the gospel of Matthew for the next twelve months. This year, then, we ask, "What will Matthew's story mean for us, in these crazy #nokings times?" Gold is the traditional gift that would be brought to a king. Is Matthew saying that Jesus is King? Frankincense was a traditional offering to a god, and myrrh was used for embalming. Is Matthew hinting that Jesus is divine, or foreshadowing his early death? And yet, the adult Jesus we come to know is not a king who lives in a golden palace, or sits on a powerful throne, but one who lived and travelled among the ordinary people, bringing unexpected hope in turbulent times.

Each year, the lectionary texts for the new year begin – but not with the Christmas story. Whether through Matthew's, or Mark's, or Luke's version in the three-year cycle, the gospel stories for this first Sunday of Advent all advise us to keep alert – to watch and to wait – and never to assume that we know when or how to expect that Jesus will come. It is all about being ready – not for the Jesus we expect, but precisely for the Jesus we don't. It is all about being awake -- to any possibility – not just to the way it has always been or to what seems inevitable. It is all about being alert – specifically so that we don't miss the moment.

So, at this time of year when our traditions draw our attention to one specific image of a jolly old man who works Christmas miracles from his workbench at the North Pole, remember that Santa comes to us in many different forms. I look at the eighteen very different Santa

Clauses on my mantle, and reflect on stories of gift-giving and generosity from around the globe, and see not a consumerism gone awry, but rather gifts given out of love to those we know and gifts given out of heartfelt genuine care for those we don't know. May you begin this year's new season of Advent with the hope and confidence that the glory of God will be found this year ... where you least expect it. Amen!

