

“Expecting the Unexpected.”

I dare say, for most people of faith, the Season of Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate the birth of a fragile, vulnerable baby boy who was born some 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. And because that tends to be our main focus, it may come as a surprise that the main theme of today’s readings from scripture is that of power. Power.

In our reading from Zephaniah, we’re told of the power of God that will bring victory to the people of Israel.

In the reading from Luke’s gospel, we learn that John the Baptist’s power was not sufficient to designate him as the long-awaited Messiah.

And, finally, in our Collect of the Day, we find these words: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.”

And so, while the temptation may be to focus on the birth of Jesus, we’re reminded that the Season of Advent is also a time to prepare for the *return* of Jesus “in power and great triumph.”¹

Therefore, at a time when so many unfortunate things are going on in the world around us— things which most of us probably feel powerless to change— our readings from scripture and prayers remind us that the people of God have always turned to God in difficult times, trusting in God’s power to intervene.

And we’ve been preparing ourselves for a long time. But for many people, their preparations are pretty much the same, year after year, because we think we know what we’re are waiting for. For example, in our readings,

when we hear Zephaniah’s description of a “warrior who gives victory,” we think we know what he’s talking about.

¹From the Proper Preface for Advent; *BCP*, pages 345 and 378.

And, when we hear how John the Baptist says that someone “who is more powerful than [he] is coming,” we think we know who he’s talking about.

However, what we so often forget, is the fact that neither Zephaniah nor John the Baptist knew who they were expecting. They had no idea. And in much the same way, today, we are promised God’s power, but we’re not told what form it will take.

And this can become very problematic, because so many of us are uncomfortable with uncertainty. And so, instead of waiting to be surprised by God, we strive to remember the things we’ve been *told* to expect— and told by people who *thought* they knew what to expect— and we look for those things to happen.

(There was a young lady in my congregation in Kansas who read the entire *Left Behind* series of books, and was thereby convinced that when Jesus returned, butts would be kicked. And how!)

However, when we do that— when we tell ourselves and others to be on the lookout for certain things to happen— we’re missing the opportunity, which Advent uniquely affords us, to *not remember*— to have no expectations of God; but rather to allow God the space and freedom to do what it is that God always does: and that is to help people have everything they need, and to have it when they need it.

In other words, Advent affords us the opportunity to take God out of that box into which we’ve so often placed him. And so, in this Season of Advent:

we are given the opportunity to wait, and *not know* exactly what we are waiting for;

we’re reminded that we have been promised power from on high, and be content with *not knowing* the form it will take; and

we’re given the assurance that everything that isn’t right with the world will be transformed by God, even if we aren’t told when that will happen. And to be alright with that.

And now, I'd like to offer to you a cautionary parable:

Once there was a man who wanted to have an encounter with God. So he went out to a high place and cried out to God: "Speak to me!" But all he heard was a bird singing.

Trying again, he pleaded with God: "Touch me!" But all he felt was the breeze caressing his face.

Finally, the man shouted to the high heavens: "Show yourself to me!" But all that he could see were the wildflowers in the field below him.

And so he went home, utterly convinced that God had ignored him.

And even when he saw his daughter running out to greet him, and heard her calling his name, and felt her embrace, he was still convinced that God had utterly forgotten him.

I'm sure it's easy for you and me to see God in that story. But that man was *as certain* about what it meant to experience God, as we are about how we expect God to take care of this world and his people. However, like that man in the parable, we may be wrong as well.

So, on this third Sunday in Advent, let's try to be less than certain about what will happen at the return of Christ; and to begin doing that, let's look again at the word that is today's theme: power.

What is this power, which we're asking "to come among us"? If you the words of our Collect of the Day, it's a power we seek, but not because we wish to conquer others, but rather "because we are sorely hindered by our sins."

That doesn't sound like Zephaniah's warrior who will bring us victory, does it?

And that doesn't sound like John the Baptist's coming Powerful One who will separate the wheat from the chaff, and burn the chaff with an unquenchable fire, does it?

But that's how it has always been.

The Israelites waited for a military general, and God gave them a baby born in a manger.

John the Baptist was looking for an ax-bearing, chaff-burning leader, and God sent a suffering servant.

The Philippians expected Jesus to return at any moment, and give them relief from their suffering. But what God gave them was his peace, "which surpasses all understanding," to guard them and keep them.

And this is *truly* how it's always been:

we seek God's power, but we can't really know what form it will take;

we seek God's hope, but we can't really know where it will come from; and

we seek God's direction, but we can't know where it will lead us.

We'd like to know all these things— and maybe we can even convince ourselves that we do know, but we really don't know.

But what all of our lessons and prayers insist, is that, despite all that we know and don't know, the power of God *will* come among us— and probably in ways we can't even imagine— and it will be exactly what we needed, and maybe even what we wanted.

So we wait, and we pray for the power of God to come into our midst. While we do that, let's also pray that we can give up the need to know *how* God will come to us.

If we can do that, perhaps, when he does come,

our eyes will not only look at him, but really see him,

and our ears will not only hear him, but really understand him;

and our bodies will not only sense his presence, but also recognize his touch.

In this Advent season, may God truly open our eyes and our ears, and may he open our hearts to know and welcome the One who always surprises us, who always meets our needs, and who always calls us each by name.

Amen.