

# Expect the Unexpected

*A Sermon for Proper 16, Year A*

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We encounter the unexpected in our lives all the time, from daily occurrences like being caught by a surprise shower—though maybe around here that's actually not so unexpected—to life-changing things: a layoff when we thought we might be called in for a promotion, a breakup when we were expecting a proposal...or, a call to the priesthood when we expected to be an English professor. No? Just me?

In all seriousness, though, we all have these stories. Broken relationships and surprise friendships, troubling diagnoses and unexplained recoveries, infertility and pregnancy loss and unexpected parenthood, accidents both tragic and happy. The unexpected can be devastating or delightful—or sometimes both. But it is undeniably a part of life.

The triumph of the unexpected is a consistent theme in the Bible—time and again we see that God works with the unexpected to do amazing things. Today's reading from Exodus, the story of the original Moses basket, is a great example.

When a new pharaoh comes to Egypt, he does something power-seekers throughout history have done: he selects a group—already a minority without a whole lot of power—and he attempts to unite people against them. Striking preemptively, he enslaves the Israelites and forces them to build two of his supply cities, cities that support his rigid control over the distribution of goods.

But something happens that the pharaoh does not expect: the Israelites continue to thrive. They don't lose heart, they continue to grow in number, and the physical labor makes them strong. Even suffering and slavery can't diminish God's sustaining power and plan for God's people.

Next the pharaoh tries something more drastic: he demands that the midwives Shiprah and Puah kill all Hebrew male babies as they are born. (Notice that he doesn't see the need to kill the female babies—he doesn't see them as a threat.) Surely *this* would work. But something happens that the pharaoh does not expect: the Israelites continue to thrive.

The midwives have a calling: to protect, preserve, and welcome life. This is their vocation, the tug of God on their hearts. The pharaoh's instruction asks them to deny this call, to turn their backs on it and end, rather than preserve life. Following their consciences and calls, these midwives (women, mind you—not a threat, right?) quietly refuse Pharaoh's command. When questioned about this they lie, breaking the law for the sake of justice, saying (with a laugh just

under the surface, I wonder?) that the Israelite women were simply too robust and quick at giving birth. And among the many lives these midwives save is the life of Moses, who will one day lead the Israelite people to freedom. Who would expect God to work through midwives?

Since commanding the midwives to kill the baby boys didn't work, the pharaoh extends the command, telling all his people to kill Hebrew baby boys by throwing them into the Nile River—I guess he didn't learn his lesson about just how powerful girls and women can be. But Pharaoh does not expect the power of a mother's love: Moses' mother shields and protects her baby for three months. And Pharaoh does not expect the power of a network of women: of Moses' mother Jochabed sending her son in the original Moses basket, a kind of ark, down the Nile; of his sister Miriam watching out for her brother; of Pharaoh's own daughter rescuing the baby from the water and taking him in as her own. Womanist sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes goes so far as to remind us "that if it wasn't for the women" there would be no exodus, no Moses, no liberation of the Children of Israel.

Pharaoh tried to make the Nile a watery grave for Hebrew infants, a tool of death in service of his power. And yet the women in our story, an unexpected group to be sure, succeed together in making the river a tool of life. As the story ends, Moses' mother, who had been a slave receiving no wages living in fear of losing her son, is paid to do the thing she most longed to do: care for her child. The pharaoh did not expect those without power or position to challenge his own power—but God worked in unexpected situations and through unexpected people because those unexpected situations and people were all part of God's plan.

And then in the Gospel, we have dear, precocious Peter, our own patron. Peter who a couple of weeks ago opened his mouth and almost got himself drowned. In the Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples questions. First he asks them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" What are people saying about me? What's the word on the street? And the disciples share what people are saying, share the expected answers: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." I can almost imagine them sitting around, like a class of eager students, each building on another with their answers. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't comment on these answers, doesn't discount them or say they're wrong. He just listens.

But then Jesus asks another question, an unexpected question: "But who do you say that I am?" Many of you are or have been teachers, and if not that then you can remember being students—you know the silence that follows a difficult question. Eyes cast down, saying silent prayers that someone, anyone but you, will say *something*. The tension builds until Peter can't take it anymore and blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

I have a feeling Peter was not the intellectual of the group, not the one the others would've tagged to come up with the "right" answer, yet Jesus commends him, blesses him, names him as the solid rock foundation of the Church, gives him the keys to the Kingdom.

I wonder what the other disciples thought. Were they surprised to hear those things about Peter? Did they wish they had spoken up instead, thinking *oh man, I knew that answer!* They couldn't have expected the things they heard, yet here is another part of God's plan.

It's also worth noting that it isn't the end of the story. Answering this question and receiving this blessing is not the culmination of Peter's faith journey. In other Gospel accounts, Jesus goes on to describe the suffering and humiliation that will come along with being the Messiah, and Peter rebukes Jesus, tells him he must be mistaken—moving Jesus to words that are shocking across languages and millennia: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Peter thought he knew the answer: Jesus was the Messiah. But what Peter expected the Messiah to be and what being the Messiah actually meant were not the same.

Peter had many lessons in overturned expectations. He was just an average husband and fisherman when Jesus called him out of his boat—I often wonder what his wife thought of the decision, or whether he had children. Peter expected Jesus to be a great teacher, but I don't imagine he expected the miracles, the transfiguration, the crowds. He certainly didn't expect Jesus to be condemned to death, and even more certainly didn't expect to betray his teacher and friend in the last hours beforehand, or to be forgiven on a beach by that friend, who was not dead but alive. Even after today's words about a rock and keys, I can't imagine Peter expected preaching to thousands on Pentecost, traveling to Rome, or being martyred there. These were not the sorts of things a Hebrew fisherman would expect. And yet these unexpected turns truly were the foundation of the Church.

God doesn't work the way we expect—unless perhaps we expect the unexpected. There's a good chance you've heard this message before, because it's a common theme in our scripture, but I wonder if you, like me, sometimes forget how much this theme is still in play today. It's much easier to expect God to work in certain ways, to fit into the mold we've imagined, to use the people we think God should use.

I wonder how often we think someone is too much of something to be furthering God's kingdom and leading us closer to God. How could they be leading us? They're too...fill in the blank: too liberal, too conservative, too outspoken, too passive, too young, too old, too gay, too rebellious, too uneducated, too mentally ill...the list goes on.

Or how often we think God couldn't be leading us to a particular path or action because it would upset our status quo, upend our way of life—and what would people think?

But as today's readings remind us, God has always favored the unexpected, the leaders the world rejects, those without traditional power or standing, without the traits we would consider ideal. And something amazing happens: because when we can break free of all our expectations, we find there's so much more than we ever imagined: more possibility, more creativity, more love—more God.