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“Unexpected Places” The Rev. Garrett Lane (12/24/2023, The Fourth Sunday of Advent)

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Let us pray, Almighty God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen. Welcome you chosen few who have decided to come to Advent 1 in the morning on Sunday, which of course you're coming to our Christmas services later, right? I hope that you do, though. I hope you consider that because we have these places, whether you came here out of a mistake that you were coming on Christmas Eve in the morning on Sunday or whether you came knowing that we were still going to be wearing blue, even though the flowers are up, even though the Christmas celebrations are almost here, even though you knew all these things, you came because there are places that we expect to find God. There are places that we expect to find God. Perhaps it is like this place, perhaps it is a church, you expect to find God on Sundays. Perhaps for some I've been told, you find God in the calm of the morning when you're having your cup of coffee, when you're watching the sunrise. Some people find God in the quiet of the morning, not me generally. I'm like trying to wake up. Maybe you find God when you're running, maybe you find God when you're exercising, when you're using the body in tune with motion and with what's happening to you physically. Maybe you find God when you're with friends, when you're enjoying the company of one another. Perhaps you expect to find God when you sit down for a big holiday meal, turkey, ham, and everything, all of the fixings, and there's family around the table, there's loved ones, and you expect to find God there. Or maybe that's the place where you

know God is not at.

Some of us might be that way. I'm definitely not going to find God there.

But for centuries, really all of human history, we have these places where we think we know where God is, these holy places where we go to have some kind of experience with God,

and these places that are holy are places where we pilgrimage to, we travel long journeys to, to pray. We take things to be sacrificed at these holy places.

I know that God will show up in a way that I expect God to show up if I go to this holy place.

And for many of these places, these are mountains, high places. Mount Olympus in Greek mythology, you may have heard, is where the gods live, where they reside. There's another mountain in Greece

that's revered by the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church Mount Athos, where monks live today.

Mount Sinai in the Old Testament, our Moses received the Ten Commandments,

these high places. People seek God out on mountains. And I grew up near the Sierra Nevada Mountain

Range in California. And for those of you that are familiar with Yosemite National Park,

Kings Canyon National Park, Redwood National Forest, these are a few of the places that I grew up

close by. I found God on many mountains. I was baptized up in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

There was, we would camp there, we would fish there. It wasn't a place just where I would go to

find God, but where I would do lots of things. And I can remember during a particularly difficult time

in my life when I was trying to kind of figure out who I am and my place in the world. I was home

on a break from college and I was going on a hike with a friend. And on that hike, I was hoping to

get some clarity. I can remember praying that I hope to find God on my hike in the mountains.

And that's a good prayer. I don't know why I inflected it that way, but that's a good prayer.

But I hope that God would give me something. I kind of was expecting, like I'm going to get on

the mountain and I'm going to hear something. And when I got up there, I saw a bear, very close.

We were on some switchbacks. We heard some rustling and a bush. And out came this massive bear,

not even 15 yards from us, barreling away. It was afraid of us. But that was about the only thing

that I saw on the mountain that day. I did not find the one thing I was really hoping to find.

But this impulse to think that we know where God is and that we can go there is a part of our human condition. Think about this. Walmart, you think, no God. I say target, you think God is there.

Houston Astros, no God. World series winning Texas Rangers. God's got to be there.

You're in laws that your house for Christmas, no God, no God. When you go to church, maybe I think

we can find God there. There are these places where we think that God lives and then there are

the actual places that God is at. And sometimes these places overlap. Sometimes the place where we

think God is and where God actually is, overlap. And for folks living around Jerusalem, when Jesus was

alive, God had an address. God had an actual home, a house built by stones. And it had a zip code.

You can send a Christmas card to this house. It was the temple in Jerusalem. This was God's home.

It was where many people believed that God lived a sure place to find God. And it sat on a hill.

The reading from the gospel of Luke today is a passage that we hear and we mostly take for granted

this idea that God hasn't dressed and they could go there. Because when the angel Gabriel shows up

to Mary, to this woman who is engaged to Joseph, when he says greetings, favored one, the Lord is with

you, she was much perplexed by these words and pondered in her heart what they might be in verse 29.

Because God lives in a place. God has a home. How would God be with me?

They go on to have this conversation where the angel says, don't be afraid. You're going to conceive

a son. She's a little confused about the logistics of that, which I'm sure anyone would be.

And it's a story we all know, or most of us know, she does eventually give birth to a son.

And the angel says this son will be named Jesus. He will be a king. He will be ascending to the throne

of his ancestor, David. And his reign will be forever and nothing is impossible without God

and Mary responds and says, here I am.

Passage that we take for granted, I think, because it's a prequel to the real story, to the Christmas

story. But we are still in Advent. Christmas begins at 3 p.m. today at this church with our services.

And so I want to hang out here. Greetings, favored one in verse 28. I don't know if you have

ever tried to greet someone with this greeting. Greetings, favored one. Not exactly something that

I would recommend. If I received a phone call and it greetings,

favored one, it would expect an 800 number may be interested, but I probably hang up. But it does set Mary apart. God sees you, Mary, greetings. Cared for by God, picked out from others. The Lord is with you also in verse 28.

A curious phrase that we hear every Sunday. The Lord be with you and also with you.

When we gather in prayer as well, we hear it. And it's interesting to think, what does it mean for

God to be with someone? And that's the confusion for Mary. She knows where God is. God has a home.

God has a temple. And this phrase is meant to be a comfort. God is with you.

And another phrase in verse 37 that the angel says to Mary. Nothing is impossible with God.

This is a reference to Elizabeth conceiving Mary's cousin, conceiving a child in her old age.

And also the miraculous conception that Mary will undergo. Nothing is impossible with God. Because

for God to be anywhere other than the temple. For God to be anywhere other than where we expect God

to be would be a miracle. Mary's told also that her child will be a king. And there is already a

king that's ruling a Caesar who rules in Rome. This is in itself as a cause for disbelief.

God appearing in an unexpected way, in a new way. In a way that is frightening, in a way that

changes our view about how the world works. And this holy woman who bears God herself says yes.

The places that we expect God to show up do not always overlap where God is. That's a story we hear

throughout the Bible. Ruling over nations with great emperors, we don't see God there,

visiting people, caring for them, words of resurrection for the poor and the downtrodden. We hear

God there, we see God there. Entering even into our world and coming to us, not staying up on some

mountain, not staying up in some far away place. But being present with us individually and as

humans, that's where God is. Making a dwelling place in us, sanctifying us, making us holy,

making a home in an unexpected place ourselves. God dwells within us. He dwells with us unexpectedly

through his Holy Spirit given to us a baptism. There are a few things, I think we take it for granted,

but there are a few things that are more unexpected than to think I carry God with me wherever I go.

Not as some kind of better angel that sits on your shoulder, telling you what to do,

making a tally mark of when you get in an argument that was too petty

or tell a little white lie,
or that kind of thing, but more in the way that is like a glass of
water, a carrier of water,
when you go on a long hike, something to sustain you for a journey.
That's how we carry God.
To give us life and life and abundance to those he dwells in.
And we don't really have to do much to make God show up. There isn't
some magic button,
you don't have to go out in the courtyard and stand on your head and
face south to equinox and
all these things. Christ became human and Christ is fully God. And God
shows up to dwell in us
because he showed up to dwell in Christ first. God is with us, and so
we find God in this unexpected
place ourselves. The collect from today, which is the prayer that we
heard Reverend Andrew
read, Reverend Dr. Andrew R. Mundered, is this prayer? I'll read the
first few lines. We besiege the
Almighty God to purify our consciences by thy daily visitation. This
idea that God visits us daily,
not just every week on Sunday, not just when we have the courage to go
up to a high place on a mountain
to find God, but daily God is with us. It says that we can expect good
things from God,
who arrives as a child and is taken care of by a mother. It reminds us
that during our arguments
with our partners, sighing over cleaning a dog that has been muddy,
that ran through the backyard
on a rainy day, that that anxiety you get when you check your bank
account on the holidays,
during all of these normal things, God is with us. There is an ad
campaign that I remember
from my youth in the 80s and the 90s. This ad campaign ran in the 80s
and the 90s, and it's
well known today, and I don't always understand it, but I think it
works for this. There's a drink mix,
originally cherry, and flavor that some of you might have had. I am
talking about the Kool-Aid
ad campaign featuring the Kool-Aid man. Yes, I got some laughs. You
know where it's going.
The picture of Red Kool-Aid would burst through a wall or something,
drywall, anything,
stones, and say, oh yeah, when people were expecting him. I'm really
thirsty. Where's the Kool-Aid man?
Quenching thirst. His signature move is ripping through drywall,
ripping through wood,
and stone, and causing mayhem all to get kids their tasty drink. And
my household was a
tang household growing up, so I did not drink very much Kool-Aid. But
he bursts through and quenches

the thirst of these kids that have summoned them, and I'm not saying that God is like the Kool-Aid man at all. That's not what I'm saying. But I will say that unexpectedly, showing up, shifting our world around, giving us something that we need, it sounds pretty similar. Similar in some ways, you have to admit. And I do think that the Kool-Aid man is a good advent message, an expectation of when we call God, we don't know where God is going to show up, but we can count on God showing up. Advent tells us that God shows up in these unexpected places. That God will burst through the sky, gathering all of humanity together, and Christ will rule as our king and as our brother. And this last Sunday of Advent, this last service of Advent, after the colors change, we will be celebrating the birth of Christ and the victory over the powers of the world. But it is still Advent where we wait, expectantly, for God. The spoiler of this whole story is that God comes to us. We expect that the one that will save us from death will be a mighty warrior king to fight death, not some small helpless child. We are looking to the top of the mountain and Christ is gently tapping us on the shoulder, pulling at our coattails, and we have to turn to him. Christ arrives unexpectedly, because he is so near to us, because he dwells upon us with the Holy Spirit. So we have anticipation this morning. Anticipation for what comes next after Advent, what starts today. But also anticipation about how God will meet us. God will meet us where we are in our personal spaces, not some mountain far away, declaring that the Lord indeed is with us. It is meant to be a comfort, a salve, and water for our expectant journey. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Holy Lord, we anticipate your coming, we anticipate your son coming to our world, and we anticipate him coming again in glory, drawing all people to himself and redeeming us. Give us patience as we wait. And your son's holy name we pray. Amen.