

South Bay Community Church  
Sermon Reflections  
Expect the Unexpected: Go and Do Likewise  
11 December 2022  
Lead Pastor Rev. Tammy Long

**Scripture Text:** Luke 2:1-20

**Sermon Preamble**

As we continue with our series, “Expect the Unexpected,” we revisit the story of Jesus’ birth. We have reached the point where angels sang a Christmas carol on a night that catches the attention of people with extra bright stars in the sky. In Luke’s historical account, God’s promised gift is about to arrive in the most unexpected way, in the most unexpected place, and among the most unexpected witnesses. God loves to surprise us with the unexpected. We continue to look for the ways God is surprising us every day. Likewise, God is inviting us to do something unexpected for someone else out of love.

**Unpacking afresh the familiar biblical account in Luke 2:1-20**

Some of us have heard the familiar biblical account of Luke 2:1-20 numerous times year after year. If you grew up in church, you probably remember those Christmas pageants, the recitations and poems we had to memorize, and those nativity plays. We had to figure out the parts, props and costumes. How do we present the manger? What is the right doll to be the baby Jesus? Who would play Mary, Joseph, and the Angel? The Angel was actually the leading role, since Mary and Joseph do not say anything. The Angel declares those familiar lines that will forever be connected to Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

The trouble with the familiar is that we can become too accustomed to the story. Sometimes, we even learn the story wrong, and it sticks. The Bible never says three kings were at the manger. According to the biblical book of Matthew, they come about two years later. There is nothing in the Bible about a little drummer boy. These are great stories, but not what the Bible tells us.

Plus, when a story is very familiar, we can stop paying attention. Then we miss the message God may have for us each year. No matter how familiar the story, God’s Word never gets old, tired, or irrelevant, but we do! We can hear with old ears, and we mistake God’s very relevant message for us.

So we are going to dig into this story again. Whether it is your 5<sup>th</sup> or 85<sup>th</sup> hearing, let’s hear what God has for us today, as we look and listen for God at work in the unexpected.

**Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for the census, and he took Mary with him**

“At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child” (Luke 2:1-5).

Since Joseph was from the family line of David, he had to go to Bethlehem, about 80 – 90 miles from Nazareth and a substantial journey. Mary’s presence with him is a bit unexpected. We don’t know why he took Mary with him on the journey. Perhaps, we would expect that Mary would stay with family, her mother or other women to avoid the arduous journey. Perhaps Joseph wanted to be present at the birth of the baby. Or perhaps they were aware of the prophecy in Micah 5 about Bethlehem being the place from which the Messiah would come, and they recognized their role in fulfilling that prophecy.

Luke is always intentional in telling his account. None of the details are fluff. For example, Luke sets the birth of Jesus clearly in history. Caesar was real, the census was real, and the process was real. Historical documents establish the taking of the census occurred in that part of the world every 14 years.

There are actual census documents dating from AD 20 until AD 270. These documents confirm the process and the timing of the first census occurring around the time of Jesus' birth.

### **Most likely, Joseph and Mary would have used a family stable in a relative's home**

Our childhood memories of nativity plays have Joseph and Mary going door to door looking for a room in an inn, like looking for a hotel room. This viewpoint is likely incorrect, and is not what the Bible declares. The Greek word translated inn or lodging actually means a guest room. Given the culture, it is most likely that Joseph would have gone to a relative's home. There was no space in the guest rooms because of all the people in town for the census, AND Mary needed more privacy because she was about to deliver the baby. So the best option would have been for Mary and Joseph to use the family stable where animals were also kept. Certainly, that is unexpected! Mary and Joseph would have never envisioned giving birth with an animal audience.

### **Luke matter-of-factly uses only two verses for the actual birth of Jesus**

"And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snuggly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them" (Luke 2:6-7). Jesus is born. In the text, the birth feels like simply a matter-of-fact statement. The writing feels so uneventful, like Jesus came into the world and no one really noticed or cared. This is the opposite of what we would expect for the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

This contrasts with the unexpected accounts of Luke: The unexpected appearance of Gabriel to Zachariah, Elizabeth's unexpected baby in her old age, the unexpected scandal of Mary's pregnancy, and the unexpected angel visitation to both Mary and Joseph.

The birth of Jesus is so different from when John the Baptist was born and Zechariah burst into a song of praise. The birth of Jesus is also different from when Mary's pregnancy was confirmed, and Mary erupted into a song of praise.

Jesus is born in an unexpected out of the way space and placed in an unexpected animal feeding trough, instead of a cradle. This feels ordinary, common, humble, meek, and mild. It appears that Luke wrote this way on purpose. Is humble, meek, and mild the point about Jesus?

### **Suddenly, the Angel appeared among the shepherds with radiance of the Lord's glory**

"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them" (Luke 2:6-7). Let's contrast two scenes happening on that night.

By the time Jesus is actually born, Mary and Joseph would have been exhausted; it takes a lot to give birth. It is a lot of work and stress for the newborn also. Babies have to get acclimated to being outside the womb, so they sleep a lot. When Jesus is actually born, it is sedate and quiet in the stable.

In contrast, something is brewing in the field nearby. Luke writes, "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared..." The word "suddenly" calls us to attention. Whereas Jesus' birth was natural and unassuming, what is happening in the field is unnatural, "in your face," and sudden. An angel appears and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounds the shepherds. The radiance was bright and a beautiful display against the darkness of night. It was completely unexpected!

Rightfully so, the shepherds were terrified. The fact that it is so sudden would scare anyone. An angel and blinding light appears before their eyes. The angel said what they typically say: a reassuring, "Do not be afraid."

### **The Angel announces the birth of the Savior, Messiah, and Lord today in Bethlehem**

"I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord- has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!" (Luke 2:10-11). We have heard this so

many times. There is so much in these verses that the first hearers would have caught. However, we still miss it two thousand years later.

The Angel affirms the identity of the baby. He is the Savior; He is the Messiah; He is the Lord. Each of the terms is significant. We tend to use them interchangeably, and that is not wrong. Actually, each of these terms offer a nuance of truth, and each have their own meaning.

The Hebrew word “Messiah,” or the Greek word “Christ” means anointed one. An anointed one is a person set apart for God’s purpose. The Jews had been waiting for centuries for the one set apart by God to deliver them from their enemies and restore the rule of the Kingdom of David. The coming of the Messiah also meant peace, prosperity, health, and wholeness.

The term “Lord” means sovereign authority and the divine one. To join together the terms “Christ” and “Lord” is particularly powerful. It means that Jesus is both the anointed one (the promised Messiah) and divine God in the flesh. Jesus is not just the one God anointed, but also the divine God.

The term “Savior” would have struck a slightly different chord to the original hearers. While savior relates to deliverer, in biblical days, the term savior had political overtones. For Greeks and Romans, the term “savior” was given to their gods, military leaders, rulers, and political leaders.

### **The term “Savior” was applied to the Roman emperor, Augustus**

In Luke’s day, term “savior” had extensive propaganda praising the peace Caesar Augustus had brought to the Roman Empire. Augustus was called “the savior of the world.” Luke intentionally connected Jesus’ birth with the term savior as used in Augustine history. Luke is highlighting that Jesus, not Augustus, is the real and true savior and Good News.

The term “Good News” or gospel was actually a common political term in the Roman Empire that signified the reigning emperor had brought an end to war and ushered in peace for all who submitted to him. There are two stone tablets found in the market place area Priene, an ancient Greek city, and currently housed in the Berlin Museum. These stones have an inscription that reads, “The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the (good news) for the world that came by reason of him....” These tablets are dated a few years before the birth of Jesus, but the language of good news is similar to the Angel’s words.

The Angel is declaring Good News of Jesus’ birth, not Good News of Augustus. This is good news for all people, not just citizens of Rome or Judea. The Angel’s announcement of the birth of Jesus had theological, as well as political implications. These implications were not lost on the original hearers. It was completely unexpected. The original hearers would not have understood what it all meant, but God had their attention. God’s plan was in the works.

### **The Angel gave a sign of the unexpected: a baby lying in a manger**

“And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). Again, this sign is the unexpected. Could it really be that the Savior, Messiah, and Lord was lying in a manger in some stable with no luxury, no palace, nor wealthy home? The location is not a big city like Rome, but that puny little village of Bethlehem.

### **There is another sudden unexpected: the armies of heaven praising God**

“Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven- praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased’” (Luke 2:13-14). This is Jesus’ song of praise. The angelic armies of heaven for a heavenly chorus for the newborn King of Kings! The arrival on earth of God’s Son caused all of heaven to join in songs of praise. “Glory to God” focuses on the one who put the plan in motion. “Peace on earth with whom God is pleased” refers to the peace with God that only the Messiah can bring. While it is good news for everyone, this peace will only rest on those who decide to accept Jesus’ invitation. Everyone has a choice.

### **The Angel gave to shepherds the sign of a baby in a manger**

“When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in a manger” (Luke 2: 15-16). The sign the Angel gave them was very clear. There were probably other babies in Bethlehem that night, but only one was to be found in a manger, so it was not hard to find. They find the child, exactly as the Angel said.

### **Another unexpected surprise was the shepherds themselves**

For an announcement of this magnitude and significance, shepherds are not the group we would anticipate. Revealing Jesus’ birth to the religious leaders would be the expected path, but God loves to move in unexpected ways. Shepherds did not have the best reputation. They were considered outcast, thieves, and sometimes violent.

These shepherds appear to have been a unique group. They were in close proximity to Bethlehem, and could get there quickly. It is believed that these shepherds were actually temple shepherds who cared for the sheep that were offered as animal sacrifices. How fitting that these shepherds are the first to hear of the good news and meet the sacrificial lamb sent by God.

### **God often moves in the unexpected, not just in big surprises, but in ordinary life**

God un-expectantly weaves everything into God’s unfolding plan. For the unexpected birth of Jesus, God used all kinds of situations and realities. There are many examples: God used the barrenness of Elizabeth, Zachariah’s turn to serve in the temple, a betrothed couple, Joseph and Mary, who loved God, an intergenerational family relationship between Elizabeth, an older woman, and Mary, a teen girl, a government census to get a young man, Joseph, and his fiancé to Bethlehem, a political landscape ripe for a Savior, an available animal stable as the perfect birthing room, and temple shepherds simply doing their ordinary and mundane chores.

Any of these things, in and of themselves, are not noteworthy. They are part of ordinary day to day life, but when God weaves things together in unexpected ways, and in unexpected time, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

We must keep our eyes open for the unexpected even in the ordinary. You don’t know what God is doing in our situation that may seem impossible. God works through opportunities that land in your lap, relationships you may not think are significant, cultural, social, or civic conveniences, the political landscape we find ourselves, last minute or unwanted changes and adjustments. These are some of the ordinary and mundane realities of daily living that God uses to weave the unexpected in our lives.

### **We reflect more deeply on Jesus’ birth because we know the rest of the story.**

Mary pondered these things in her heart, and God had the attention of those who knew about prophecies of Jesus’ birth. However, there was much they did not understand. Today, we can connect the dots because we understand why Jesus came. Jesus took on flesh to be with us. The peace Jesus offers is a restored intimate relationship with God. The Spirit lives within all who call him the only true Savior, and Christ the Lord. Jesus came to earth as a human baby, grew into adulthood, experienced everything we experience, died, and rose again because of his great love, grace, and mercy for every single person who has lived, is living now, and will live in the future.

### **Jesus is Immanuel – God with us, and came in the most humble, unexpected way**

God is so close and near. God is weaving our lives, working things out for our good, listening to our prayers, capturing our tears, healing our hurts, guiding and leading us, and enjoying who God has made us to be.

Jesus came in the most humble, unexpected way to be with us. “Though he was God, he did not think equality with God as something to cling to. Instead he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a servant and was born as a human being.” (Philippians 2:6-7).

Here is the link to an insightful video titled, “I AM with You.”

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WAlJPoI1guBBYAxieECqK3eKggQ6pZ1e/view>

“After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished. The shepherds went back to their flock, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them” (Luke 2: 17-20). Like the shepherds who shared the good news, God invites us to go and share with others what God has done for us.

### **What God extends to us is meant to be shared with others; be the unexpected for others**

“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Corinthians 1:4). The biblical principle is that we extend to others what we have received from God. As God comforts us, we comfort others with the comfort we have received. As God loves us, we love with the love we have received. As God extends grace and mercy, we share the grace and mercy we have received. As we are blessed, we bless others with the blessing we have received.

God loves to surprise us with the unexpected. As you continue to look for ways God is surprising you every day, let us do likewise to others. Let us do something unexpected out of love for someone, particularly someone in need, or that you do not know well, or who may need a loving touch or gesture. Let us be the unexpected for others as Jesus has been for us.

As we celebrate the greatest unexpected gift ever given, let us act like our Heavenly Father, who loves to surprise in unexpected ways. Let us do something unexpected for another out of love. In what ways in the next week, can you extend to others what you have received from God?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS**

### **Sermon Preamble**

-In what unexpected ways is God surprising us every day, even in our ordinary activities?

### **Unpacking afresh the familiar biblical account in Luke 2:1-20**

-What are potential disadvantages of a biblical story becoming so familiar that we stop paying attention to certain truths of the story?

### **Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for the census, and he took Mary with him**

-For the example of Luke 2:1-5, what historical documents affirm the historical accuracy of Luke’s biblical text?

### **Most likely, Joseph and Mary would have used a family stable in a relative’s home**

-Why is it most likely that Joseph and Mary would have used a family stable with animals in a relative’s home, not a hotel type room?

### **Luke matter-of-factly uses only two verses for the actual birth of Jesus**

-In what ways is the contrast stark, between the expected rights of the Messiah in his home town of David, and the very humble and ordinary circumstances of Jesus’ birth? What point is Luke making by briefly showing the humble, meek, and mild birth of Jesus?

### **Suddenly, the Angel appeared among the shepherds with radiance of the Lord’s glory**

-As Jesus was born in the quiet and sedate animal stable, what unexpected, extraordinary events happened in the nearby fields with the shepherds?

### **The Angel announces the birth of the Savior, Messiah, and Lord today in Bethlehem**

-The Angel affirms the identity of the baby, Jesus. What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah? What does it mean that Jesus is Lord? What does it mean that Jesus is Savior?

**The term “Savior” was applied to the Roman emperor, Augustus**

-In biblical days, how was the term, “Savior,” used with political overtones?

**The Angel gave a sign of the unexpected: a baby lying in a manger**

-What is the unexpected sign of the baby that is the Messiah, Lord, and Savior? Why are those signs unexpected for the Messiah, Lord, and Savior?

**There is another sudden unexpected: the armies of heaven praising God**

-The armies of heaven sing Jesus’ song of praise. In the song of praise, what is the meaning of “Glory to God” and “Peace on earth with whom God is pleased?” For whose benefit rests the peace of God?

**The Angel gave to shepherds the sign of a baby in a manger**

-What unexpected sign did the Angel tell the shepherds to identify the Messiah? Why was it not hard to find the baby?

**Another unexpected surprise was the shepherds themselves**

-What ordinary chores of these shepherds made them well suited, in ways we would not expect, to meet the sacrificial lamb sent by God?

**God often moves in the unexpected, not just in big surprises, but in ordinary life**

-What are some ordinary parts of your day to day life, either positive or negative circumstances, that God may be weaving things together in unexpected ways and in unexpected time, to make the ordinary an extraordinary, unexpected surprise?

**We reflect more deeply on Jesus’ birth because we know the rest of the story.**

-What advantage might we have over the original hearers in revisiting the biblical scripture because we know with increased certainty the rest of the story and plan of God?

**Jesus is Immanuel – God with us, and came in the most humble, unexpected way**

-Why is it so significant that God is so close and near with us?

-Why is it so significant that deity, in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took the form of a loving servant and took on fully birth as a human being?

**What God extends to us is meant to be shared with others; be the unexpected for others**

-In what variety of ways does the biblical principle apply that whatever we receive from God we extend and share with others?

-In the next week and into the future, how will you extend and share with others what you have received from God?