

To (Not) Know the Unexpected [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 24:36—44

What is it we expect? One of the nice things about the upcoming Christmas holiday is we know what to expect. We expect lights adorning our gutters and roof lines. We expect blue spruces and fir trees draped with tinsel. And we expect egg nog, mistletoe and cookies in the shape of sheep or snowmen or Santa Claus... And we expect music—both secular favorites like “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” as well as classic hymns like “O Come All Ye Faithful.” And it’s all coming to us—*as expected*. We know it well. And we also know how these festivities are going to fly by too quickly; and then we’ll be taking down our lights, dismantling our trees, returning clothes that don’t fit... And on and on.

Jesus, of course, couldn’t have anticipated the holiday routines in which we immerse ourselves year after year. But he does know a thing or two about expectations. In verse 38, for instance, he describes how people are eating and drinking, how people are married and given in marriage, how hard-working men are digging in the dirt and how women are grinding meal for the making of bread. These activities are to be expected. They’ve been happening for millennia; and they happened in first century Judea under the watchful eyes of Roman occupiers and synagogue sycophants. And yet, pay careful attention to Matthew 24:36—44—because, according to Jesus, everything that’s expected day after day and night after night has been tinged with the possibility of the *Unexpected*. And, by definition, that which is *Unexpected* cannot be known like we know the familiar trappings of Christmas; but maybe deep down, in the midst of everything that’s familiar and expected, we long to know something seems beyond the scope of possibility.

A few decades ago, the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was talking to some journalists about the quagmire of war in Iraq. (Maybe you can remember.) And I suppose he was trying to be clever when he said the following:

“As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”

Brilliant, right? Elusive, right? Total B.S., right? Except maybe this season of Christ’s coming prods us in the same direction. Is there something within the Christian faith, and among Christians, that *we don’t know we don’t know*? Well, hmmm, I don’t know. I’ll readily admit there are lots of things you and I know. In late December and early January, for example, 2.6 billion persons will celebrate the Bethlehem birth one way or another. And we know that, in the process, the gospels of Matthew and Luke will be read and interpreted as means of conveying the central belief of the incarnation—that in Jesus of Nazareth God took on human flesh. These things, among many others, are well-known, standard, to be expected. *Ho, ho, ho* and *Ho-hum*. Forgive me, I’m getting a little sleepy. And yet, KEEP AWAKE.

Look! Listen! I know about the ‘little Lord Jesus’ who is ‘away in his manger’ and ‘laying down his sweet head’ and ‘no crying he makes...’ I’ve been there and perhaps you have too. But this morning, a fully grown Christ tells us to KEEP AWAKE. And if you’re about to ask me for a reason why we shouldn’t nod off, knowing everything you know, I’m here to tell you, there’s a TRANSFORMATION underway and who we will be at the end of it is a huge, cosmic question mark. ***“Keep awake,”*** Jesus says, ***“for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”***

A few Christmas's ago, I happened to be walking my dogs late a night when I noticed the *Live Nativity* being offered and orchestrated by the Seventh Day Adventist Church near our home. And, of course, given all the sheep, all the donkeys and all the camels, the cars of people who came to experience the re-enactment of Christ's birth presented a parking problem. SUVs, mini-vans and huge horse-trailers dominated the horizon. But the only reason I could make out the silhouettes of these things was the incredibly large and brilliantly lit *Bethlehem Star* that had been raised to the height of a four-story building by this colossal crane. And yes, it was all very impressive... except for the fact that I wanted no part of it. I simply wanted to walk my dogs on a dark trail and have no one talk to me but the wind. And you know how some people equip themselves with flashlights, reflective clothing and head-lamps as they venture out in the darkness... ah, well, I am NOT one of them. And yet, approaching me from the other end of this trail, I *did* observe the luminescent collar of another dog and another dog-owner escorting him. They were both walking quite deliberately, at a quick pace, so much so that I perceived he couldn't see me approaching him from the opposite direction. It was then, within about twenty feet, on a moonless night, that I announced myself. And do you know what this other perambulating figure said? He said, "Jesus Christ!"

You see, that's what we're missing. What we're missing—and what Advent brings to our attention is not the confidence that we know everything that needs knowing, but a Transformative Presence that will arrive when it's dark and when we're lost in our own thoughts. And while Jesus gives us the image of a thief in the night, I'm also intrigued with the transformation the prophet Isaiah describes and how we ourselves might be caught up in it.

Swords into plowshares. Spears into pruning hooks. Nations not learning war anymore. Do we believe it? Do we expect it? Come on. Admit it. Given the amount of headlines which are utterly dominated with the innovation, the production, the sale and the strategic use of every kind of weapon, it seems naive or farcical to expect anything else; and we can expect more and more of the same. And we can expect all kinds of books and films in which the good guys beat the bad guys, and the *Empire Strikes Back* and the *Jedi Get Revenge*. But stop. Here's Advent.

In the most recent Ken Burns documentary on the Revolutionary War, a great deal of time was spent on the maneuvering of the various garrisons on the battlefield, the competencies of the various generals, the flanking of lines and the digging of redoubts; and I admit to being intrigued and curious about what specifically happened. But as much as I expected the heroism or the carnage that I watched, there was one story that caught me off-guard. Across a river in upstate New York, British loyalists and American patriots were trading barbs, shouting at one another, when suddenly one soldier leapt into the water and began to wade into it; on the other side, a opposing soldier also jumped in. The two of them then embraced with audible groans of joy. And the voice-over from the narrator said, "They were brothers from the same family."

So let's consider the voice-over—something even more unexpected, something about how God is desiring to transform us, something we can't know:

"... if the owner of the house had know in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Too often, I'm afraid, proponents of a Christian sub-culture presume to know what's being expressed here; and I'm afraid they do more harm than good. Many folks are fond of quoting the bit about the two men working in the field and one being taken, or the two women grinding meal, and one being taken; and they've become uber-confident and utterly certain about the interpretation. The idea of 'the Rapture' is one in which the righteous people will be taken out of this mess of a world, and the unrighteous will have to stay and suffer the consequences. Books and films which cater to this perspective include the '*Left Behind*' series. And yet, I'm here to suggest otherwise—and with some fairly decent scriptural reasons. Matthew's Gospel itself does not depict those who are separated out as the so-called righteous ones. On the contrary, it's those who remain and are willing to suffer transformation that Matthew 13:43 says ***“will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”*** So, you see, it's quite the opposite of what many think they know, and what just as many expect.

In an old episode of the public television show, *Call the Midwife*, there is a heavy-set teenager who starts to feel nauseas and goes to the clinic in London's east end. The clinic is located at *Nonnatus House*, where the nuns of a convent join forces with various nurses and doctors to support the impoverished families in this 1950's neighborhood. And so, this young girl in a woolen overcoat knows that she's expecting but wants to blend in. She enters the facility and lingers at a table where pamphlets, describing a woman's reproductive health, are available to peruse. Chummy, one of the nurses, then approaches the girl, assuming that maybe she'd like to become a nurse. Lynette Duncan, however, has become pregnant by a boy who's long gone; and she's ashamed of the fetus growing in her womb; and she doesn't know what to expect.

The nurses and the nuns are about to put on a Christmas pageant, and because they have no idea of the Lynette's pregnancy, they cast her in one of the parts and help her rehearse the lines she's supposed to speak and the songs she's supposed to sing. Everything's going as it's expected to go... right up until the night this teenager girl develops labor pains; and that's when she gives birth alone on a cold, damp floor in the basement of an abandoned factory.

Now, as far as I know, here at Northwood Presbyterian, no one will be performing in a Christmas pageant. But even if we were, and even if we know our lines like the backs of our hands, even if we have all the songs we're going to sing memorized down to the last syllable—I'm wondering about that non-anticipated, non-calibrated, non-sanctioned birth. I'm wondering about transformation that we cannot *expect to know*; and that we cannot *know to expect*.

Keep awake for it. Keep awake for it.