

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Christmas: Beyond All Expectations

Once again we make that journey to Bethlehem, to hear the angels' chorus, to feel the wonder at their message, to witness, along with the shepherds, the miracle of the birth of Jesus, and to, like Mary, keep all these things in our hearts and ponder them. We have an idea about Christmas in our minds, don't we? We have an image, a kind of tableau, which we hold onto in our imagination. It is conditioned by a thousand Christmas cards we have seen, and a hundred Christmas pageants, by crèche scenes and living nativity scenes, and colored by favorite Christmas carols that speak of cattle lowing and Mary, the mother mild. We can see the shepherds, see what they are wearing. We can see the sheep; smell them even, if we press our imagination. There are the wise men standing by with their gifts, bending in reverence to the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. There are other animals in the scene, of course, as the birth took place in a stable, because there was no room in the inn --a donkey, a few camels maybe... a cow. And finally, there is the holy family: Joseph looking on protectively, Mary beaming at her newborn, and Jesus lying with an expression of joyful tranquility on his face.

This is the kind of image that we have in our minds about what Christmas was like so long ago. We realize, in our rational mind, that it was probably nothing like this. It probably looked nothing like how Raphael painted it. But still, that is our image, and it is a good one. It is something we can relate to. We need to have an image like that to hold onto. We need to have a mental model of what Christmas is all about. Humans need to have some kind of shape to their expectations, something that our imaginations can easily conjure up. Otherwise we have too

much trouble trying to find the meaning in the event. I'm sure that it was the same for the people who were there, the people who really experienced this amazing thing that we come together to celebrate. They probably had their own ideas about what it would be like when God entered into the reality of human life, when God sent his anointed one, the Christ, to be our savior.

We know something about what their expectations would have been, because we have the same Holy Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. We know what kind messiah was predicted, foretold, prophesied. Just listen to the way the angel describes to the shepherds what has happened, "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Saviour. Christ. The Lord. All these titles given to Jesus by the angel would have conjured up certain images in their minds. They were titles heavily charged with meaning and expectation.

Christ, is the Greek word for the Hebrew word, messiah. It means anointed one, one who is anointed by God to do some great work. By the time of Jesus' birth, they were expecting a messiah. They were longing for God to send a messiah, for they were suffering under an oppressive foreign ruler, as they had done so many times in their history. Many times in the past God had sent a messiah. They waited and hoped for God to send another one.

We know that they expected the messiah to come from the lineage of David. So it was important that he was born in Bethlehem, where David was from. We know that they would have expected this messiah to sit on the throne of his father David, to be the king of Israel. They would have expected him to be a savior, that is, a deliverer. Like David, he would have been expected to be a great military leader, to overthrow the Roman occupiers, and to set God's people free.

The last title is a curious one, *the Lord*. Actually it can't be separated from the title *Christ* here. The angel says that Jesus is "Christ the Lord". The Lord was the polite name for God. It was considered blasphemous to utter God's holy Name. When one encountered it in reading the Scriptures, one would substitute, "the Lord". It must have puzzled the shepherds to hear that the baby born in Bethlehem was "Christ the Lord". Of course the title could also mean *master*, not especially a divine one, but one who is in charge. Surely they must have interpreted it in that way. One would refer to a king as Lord, and this child was destined for David's throne.

There's a funny thing about our expectations, they rarely come about in the way that we expect them. I bet your Christmas holiday will not go exactly as you expect it. They never do. By the time Jesus was born, as I said, people were expecting God to send a messiah. They had a kind of check list for what to expect. Like a security guard at an airport that has a composite sketch of some suspect, they had an image of what the messiah should be like, and they were watching for him, waiting for someone to come along who fit the description. In some ways, Jesus fit that image, but in many more ways, he was a complete surprise.

They believed that he would be a savior. They had no idea that he would save them, not from some foreign power, but from their very sins. They had no idea that he would save more than just the people of Israel, that he would be the savior of the whole world.

They believed that he would be *a* messiah, *an* anointed one. They had no idea that he would be *the* messiah, the last one to be anointed by God, and to be the one who is anointed with all of God's authority, and all of God's power. They had no idea that this messiah would be able to reconcile them with God.

They believed that he would be a king, in the line of David. They had no idea that the Christ's reign would extend throughout the whole creation, and throughout all time. They had

no idea that this king, this lord, would be The LORD. Their minds could never imagine that God could, or would, stoop so low as to be born of a woman and become human.

It was so far outside of their understanding of God that the infinite being could become a finite creature. Because if he became human, like you and me, fully human, that would mean that he would be subject to the same forces that you and I are subject to: like temptation, like suffering and death. Almighty and infinite God could not die! That was their understanding. That was their image of God. But they were wrong.

The messiah that they got was so far beyond their imagining that it was hard for people to accept him. Many didn't. Many still don't. But to be fair, it is difficult to describe to someone what Jesus is like until they experience him themselves. It is like when your mother or your father sat you down, just as you were on the cusp of adolescence, and explained to you all the changes that you were going to go through in the next few years, all the physical changes, all the emotional changes. Besides having the reaction of, "Gross," you really couldn't imagine what it was going to be like, not until you lived through it. You never could have imagined the turmoil you would feel, the angst, the "oh, this is the end of the world" emotions. You couldn't imagine that some of your childhood friends would change so much that you would no longer be friends, and how painful that would be, and that you would make new friends. You couldn't imagine how hormones would change your impression of the opposite sex. The process of growing up is really difficult, and it is impossible to fully prepare someone for it. They just have to live through it. When you grow up and have children of your own, you find that you have no words that are any more helpful than what were told to you.

In the same way, it is really hard to be prepared to receive the gift that God gives us at Christmas. Like children who lack the power to imagine the complexities of the adult world, our

minds are too small to fully comprehend the kingdom of God. We are always thinking too small for God's kingdom. But there is nothing like a sky full of angels to broaden your horizons. Like the shepherds that night, we get a glimpse, a tiny glimpse, of how awesome God is, and how terrifying God's glory is when it appears before us.

This Christmas I invite you to be open to the presence of God, right here in our midst, right here in the context of our mundane lives. I encourage you to see beyond that quaint image that we have of Christmas, to see the fearsome fire glowing just beyond the limits of our sight. I challenge you to be open for an encounter with the awesome, holy, and always surprising God who creates and redeems.

Our savior, Christ the Lord is born in Bethlehem. May he be born in our hearts. May we burn with celestial fire as we come face to face with the living God.

Amen.