

Come Thou Unexpected Jesus

- [Titus 2:11-14](#)
- [Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)

I've been particularly enjoying the Christmas music this year. On Sunday, Ann Lucas our musician played an arrangement of the hymn "Come thou long-expected Jesus" and my friend Jill was interested to realize that this was the same melody that we use for another hymn. As she was chatting about it she kept saying, "Come thou **Unexpected** Jesus" and I kept correcting her – "No, no," I said, "It's come thou **long**-expected Jesus."

But then I began to think about it. I think she's right.

Well actually we're both right. Jesus is long-expected but he is also always un-expected.

There had been prophecies for hundreds, indeed, thousands of years that a Messiah would come to free his people, the Israelites. They lived in that section of the world, the little coastal strip between Persia to the north and Egypt to the south which is still contested today. The Holy Land has been over-run by people from all sides for as long as anyone can remember. So it's not unexpected that there were hopes and dreams about the great one who would come and bring an end to the constant conflict.

Jesus, the long-expected Messiah.

Yet you don't need me to point out that two thousand years later we still have the same problems of political and military conflict. If indeed he was the long-expected Messiah, Jesus did not solve the problem for the people of Israel and Palestine. So apparently, he didn't do a very good job.

Perhaps this is why he is so **un**expected. Some of us want a Savior who sorts out the problems that we see in the world -international conflict, hunger, homelessness, political gridlock, climate change to name but a few. Yet Jesus didn't do and doesn't do any of that. Not directly. Others of us want a Savior who will sort out our personal problems and teach us how to live so that everything goes well. Jesus isn't like that either.

The scholar and writer, Karen Armstrong recently said, "Scripture is not all about me, [and] my salvation... [that makes] Jesus sound like a personal trainer instead of this dynamic figure in the Gospels, an explosive character who is endlessly pushing forward, going out and meeting suffering and pain."

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We didn't expect a Savior who was going out and meeting suffering and pain. We expected a Savior who would take away our suffering and pain. But that isn't Jesus' way.

The reality is that there is suffering and pain in this world. Now if I were God, I might have created it some other way, but I'm not. Pain, suffering and discomfort are built into the system. The Buddhist path says that suffering is the result of attachment – we suffer because we persist in thinking that things should be pain-free – so if we train ourselves to detach from those expectations we will be free from suffering. Jesus' way is different. Jesus goes out and meets suffering and pain.

From the very beginning he was unexpected. Born to an unwed mother at a time when sex outside marriage could be punished by stoning; born not in a palace but in a barn; heralded by angels and worshiped by the common people – the ones who stayed up all night watching – the local shepherds. This is not the way of the Messiah we expected.

Neither is the path of the one who goes out and meets suffering and pain and ultimately who allows himself to be killed.

But that's the Messiah we got. That's the one who we celebrate today. The God who became human. The God who took on our life with all its limitations and messy complications. The God who showed us how to do it but doesn't do it for us.

What did we hear in that brief reading from Titus?

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

The grace of God has appeared – that's Jesus – but instead of solving all our problems he gave himself so that he might –get this – “purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” I think that's bible-speak for you get to do it yourselves. You get to belong to God and to do everything you can to make this world the beloved community that we long for.

In Jesus, God who took on our life with all its limitations and messy complications. In Jesus, God showed us how to do it but doesn't do it for us.

But the story doesn't quite end there, with “meeting suffering and pain”, with do-it-yourself. Jesus was resurrected. Jesus showed us that there's something more – that suffering and pain have no power over the life of God, the “grace of God” as Titus puts it. In Jesus the Grace of God has appeared.

And that's a game changer. That's the unexpected. That's our hope. That's why we all bothered to turn up this evening when we could have stayed home and watched Netflix.

Because Jesus is God-become-human. No longer is God sitting on a cloud somewhere in the sky or looking down on us from a distant planet. God is here and now, and that's still unexpected. God is in this room, God is in your kitchen, God is in your family and your neighbors. The grace of God is here and the grace of God is freely available in every moment of our lives. It doesn't stop pain or suffering but it opens up new possibilities. In every moment, God is opening up new possibilities. In every moment God's new life is available. In every moment God is being born.

All that it takes is for us to change our thinking and turn toward God. All that it takes is for us to say yes to God's grace, the new life, the new hope offered in God's new story.

We don't know what will happen next. We never know what will happen next, yet we are writing the new story, the unexpected story with God and with each other.

So tonight as we remember the old, old story of Jesus and God's love, as we remember the birth of the long-expected Jesus, may the prayer of our hearts be "Come thou unexpected Jesus".