

Isaiah 53:1-3
John 1:9-11

UNEXPECTED

Last week we mentioned that the true Christmas is God's doing, not our doing. It's not that I think many of you disagree with that. It's not that I think you didn't "get it." It's just that I love to muse about it because to me, it seems so incredibly wonderful and special. So today, instead of getting special mention, perhaps it can become the major theme.

It is familiar, yet still startling, to stand back from the story of Jesus and realize that no other man who has ever lived on earth has had so deep an impact on so many people, over so many years. It may be fun to debate such a statement. It is interesting to muse about how the world might be different if Jesus had not come. I have been in many conversations with people who like to propose that Jesus has caused incredible strife and turmoil in our world. I often surprise them by giving them far more evidence to support this view than they themselves have thought of. Only, they conclude that it would have been better had He never come. For me, such a conclusion is unfathomable. He was willing to pay any price for us. He is worth any price we have to pay. Of course, such a statement comes from a different place than the one they know.

Nevertheless, after all the games have been played and the dust clears, the statement still stands, though I do not think that Jesus' reputation on earth is anywhere near what it ought to be. We have neglected the records; we have refused to learn from our errors; we have added layer after layer of our own agendas, preconceived notions, and wishful thinking. We have even superimposed onto Jesus some of our darkest angers and desires. On a good day – even in this new century – if you listen closely to some of the preachers, it is difficult to tell whether Jesus is Son of a loving God, or Satan about to throw us into Hell.

Despite all this, it is an overwhelming reality: Jesus has had a greater impact on our world than any other person who has ever lived on our planet. This becomes ten times more startling when we stop to ponder how He managed to have so much influence. That is, Jesus did not do any of the things that we think would make a person influential, successful, or famous. And He *did* do a lot of things that we think would *prevent* a person from becoming influential, successful, or famous. This means that Jesus is not only incredibly influential, but He reaches us in

ways we do not expect to be reached. He appeals to us on levels we do not think can work. He touches us in places we did not even know we had within us.

Down through the centuries, in country after country and culture after culture, Jesus has drawn to His cause, and to His own personal leadership, thousands upon thousands of individuals. Nearly all of them have concluded that their lives are better because of Him, even in this world. Most of the people who get to know Jesus very well would rather die than lose Him – that is, they are no longer willing to live without Him. Yet the vast majority of them do not think that Jesus has promised them any of the rewards this world most values: health, money, popularity, success, power. The only thing Jesus promises them is a personal relationship with the Living God. Everything else comes as it will, and falls where it may.

Some of Jesus' followers have been incredibly successful in this world – incredibly wealthy and powerful on the world's terms. Some of His followers have been persecuted, tortured, mocked, destroyed. Either way, it doesn't seem to make much difference to the bond between Jesus and His followers. That is, what happens between Jesus and His followers does not seem to have any direct connection to what is going on in the outer world. Somehow the reality of it – what it is really about – is based in a different dimension, and it calls forth effort and loyalty that operate here but are not and cannot be controlled by what happens here.

I wonder if any of us think *we* could design such a movement. Could we put it together, make it work? People who discount Jesus, or think He is explainable in human terms, simply have not thought about it very much. Jesus is a never-ending surprise. There are the little miracles of His own ministry: People being healed – people being changed. One of the greatest miracles on earth is a human being changing an attitude, and people who come in contact with Jesus nearly always change their attitudes. Once or twice it would be merely interesting. But hundreds of thousands of people over two thousand years? Their attitudes do not get perfect, and they themselves know it. Yet the fact is that suddenly they *know*, and some of the attitudes do change – and keep changing. If even one attitude changes, life simply cannot stay the same. It is a universal impossibility. One attitude change, and your old life is gone forever: from fear to faith ... from resentment to gratitude ...

from being alone to belonging to God's Kingdom. Earthquakes make headlines, but they are minuscule in comparison.

There are other kinds of miracles in the wake of Jesus' ministry as well. Despite incredible pressure from Zealot and other patriotic influences, Jesus refused to become part of any insurrectionist movement against the Roman Empire. Over and over, people tried to get Jesus to make statements of anger or disapproval against Rome. Even though it cost Him the support and respect of many people in His time, Jesus refused to play in this arena. Only, it was not because He did not care – had no interest or purpose or plan. The truth, almost beyond belief, is that Jesus *did* conquer the Roman Empire. He did it in His own way and time – a WAY nobody else could have imagined or taken seriously. Such a thing was unimaginable to anybody in His time. It took three hundred years – and Jesus' followers did not use the sword – but Rome finally turned away from emperor worship, and all the vast temples and ceremonies of its former gods, to claim Jesus as Savior and Son of God. If Pilate or Tiberius Caesar had heard anyone breathe such a notion, they would have thought them to be stark raving mad.

You know I am only touching the fringes of the real drama. The coming of Jesus into our world has *not* been successful in the light of any of the values, purposes, goals, or truths that Jesus proclaims. I maintain that such purposes never *will* come to completion in this world, and that Jesus makes it very clear that it will not. It is equally clear to us, I hope, that despite this, Jesus calls us and expects us to live for these very purposes and toward this end – in all our days – right here and now.

But how is it that Jesus has had such a startling influence in our world? If our world thought, believed, acted, and cared like Jesus did, it would not startle us at all ... would it? You cannot make such an enormous impact on the world by doing things the way everybody expects them to be done; by holding views everyone already agrees with; by carrying on business as usual. If Jesus were just summing up our own familiar wisdom – telling us to act according to our best instincts – then how do you explain that this Galilean peasant has had more influence in our world than any other person who has ever lived?

You understand the dilemma? I keep running into people who talk as if they think their own wisdom and actions just naturally fall in line with Jesus' wisdom and actions. They see themselves as naturally spiritual and highly evolved. They say that if anybody taps into their own best

inner self, they are already pretty much in synch with Jesus. And they say that lots of other folk have taught and displayed pretty much the same spiritual awareness and stature of Jesus, so let's not get overexcited. Let's not get all carried away or out of balance. Decorate the tree; buy some gifts; you're pretty okay the way you are; God loves you; keep politically correct; everybody be nice – and it will all come out fine in the end.

You think that's really what it is all about? We have Jesus pretty tamed down and figured out? Nothing to get overly excited about? A little "Golden Rule" here, a little "love your neighbor" there – never mind Savior; never mind conversion; never mind turning your entire life and will over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Just a little tweaking here, a little adjustment there, and we can go on with life pretty much the same as always. With us in charge, of course – doing things pretty much however we think is best. Not how we think God really wants it, but how *we* think it will work out best (for us and ours).

Sometimes people tell me that statements like this are harsh. How can that sound harsh in our world? On what basis could our world possibly object to anybody doing the best they can: being responsible, taking charge, deciding things according to what they think will work out best for themselves and those they love? "Let's be reasonable." How we love that word "reasonable." Funny how often it really means staying the way we already are. And there is not always a lot of "reason" for that! Anyway, it is clear to most of us: The problem is that some people are not responsible; do not take charge; try to live off of others; do not keep the rules; keep damaging and destroying everything around them, sometimes even themselves; do not hold up their end of anything. They just live for their own momentary gratification, and half the time they cannot even remember what they want, at least not for long enough to work or move toward it.

It is true – those folk really wreck society. But they do not wreck the Kingdom of God any more than we do – sometimes not as much. (Remember: *"Then Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you: tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.'"* (Matthew 21:31)) The one thing we humans can never get clear, and keep clear, about the Kingdom of God is that in the Kingdom of God, God is the King. We cannot do things "our way" in the Kingdom of God. It will not work and cannot work. Total allegiance to the King is the only way the Kingdom works right. And while there may be other ways to enter the Kingdom, that is not really

my affair. What I suspect for you, and know for me, is that the only way we can get into the Kingdom is if we give our hearts and lives to the King's Son, who came to this earth for the very purpose of reaching us, inviting us, choosing us – and in the end, carrying us – personally into where we, by our own efforts and merit, *cannot go*.

We do not see the end of anything here – how much power Jesus' efforts really take, how much caring they represent, how much it costs Him to do all that for us. But some of us do see and feel the front end of it – the love, The Presence with us, the guidance. And we only get into that part of it when we trust Him enough to turn will and life over to Him. Will and life. Baptism is a drowning. We die to our former life, and He raises us up for a new one. That is not the end of the story – that's for openers! That is what gets it started.

Christmas is about One who is SENT. Christmas is not about what rises up from among us – *our* hero being sent forth. Christmas is not about how we evolve – how we turn out if we get a good education, work hard, provide good families for our children, pay off the mortgage. Yes, Jesus grew up like a normal human being in this world. Incarnation is about God putting it on *our* level. The message is so startling and new, the WAY of Life so different, the Message of God's caring and love so unbelievable ... that it has to come from our own level – from somebody who is one of us – or we would scatter like frightened birds. Half the time we do anyway.

Jesus was gifted, to be sure, but He lived like a normal human being until His baptism – until the descent of the Holy Spirit. After that, something was very different. He was still very human, but also far more than human. And Jesus Himself knew it was different – He knew He was sent – He saw everything in a different light. He knew that each one of us is of far more worth to God than anybody on earth has ever dreamed or thought before. I mean, it is easy to say that lots of others have been as advanced as Jesus – that others have said or taught the same thing – but show me who they are. Name them. Tell me what they wrote or said. I'm sorry, but they do not exist! Nobody said it or believed it or lived for it until Jesus came. Afterward – after crucifixion and resurrection – it is easy to say, “Oh yeah – I knew that!”

Only, nobody knew it or claimed it – never mind living and dying for it – not before Jesus. Certainly we thought God had plans, cared about the nation or the community, raised up heroes and leaders to further the

nation's destiny – maybe even protected and guided us so we could get our work done. But nobody knew, dreamed, or said that God loved every individual like his own child, or that he had built a personal identity and purpose within them, or that he wanted them to spend all eternity in his Kingdom. We thought maybe a few of the very best, for services rendered, would be rewarded. That is a very far cry from the Gospel our Savior taught and bought for us.

Yes, it came out of Judaism, but it was also a whole new dimension. Jesus was SENT. It was not just an accident; He was not just the 100th monkey; it was not just the next logical step – that is, if Jesus had not done it, somebody else would have. God chose *to reveal* himself in Jesus Christ. And His coming into our world was so striking, so unusual, so different and startling ... that nobody else who has ever lived here has had such an enormous impact.

Do not be fooled by the way our culture pretends to be all happy and comfortable with it – families gathering, pretty decorations, lots of us showing kindness and generosity. That is always wonderful, any time of the year. But if your Christmas has anything to do with Jesus, then that is a whole different story. He comes because He knows you are far more – and far more important – than you have had any notion about. And if we allow the connection, it takes life out of our hands and puts it on a whole different level, and we have no way to know what will come of that. New lives for old – that is the Message. And that is the offer.