

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point
of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under
the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

What are your expectations of God, of Christmas? The arrival of the Christ-child ought to be an ever-present reminder to us that the Lord God Almighty is full of surprises. Who'd have guessed? A baby born to a teenaged mom from Nazareth.

Our expectations have everything to do with how we understand and relate to the world around us. For example, how many times have you gone to a movie with very high expectations only to be disappointed because the film didn't quite measure up to what you had hoped it would be. Or, you've gone to the movie with low expectations and found yourself very pleasantly surprised; it was better than you thought it would be. I've learned that my expectations of a movie inevitably shape my experience of the movie. . . . That's how it is in much of life. Our expectations of people, of work, of school, inevitably shape our experiences. We come to nothing as only a blank slate.

We even have expectations of God, plenty of them, and the Bible encourages us in this. God answers prayers. God takes care of us. God will not abandon us. And as we saw last week, God makes promises and God keeps them. God is the Great Promise-Keeper.

Yet, there is a problem. It is one thing to affirm that God keeps God's promises. It is another to know *how* God's promise-keeping will be accomplished. It is in this “how” that our expectations can often lead us astray. We think we know *how* God will answer

our prayers. We think we know *how* God will accomplish his promise-keeping. But if there is one thing we can learn from Christmas, it is that God is about the business of overturning our expectations of God. With God, we learn that, as the old saying goes, “expect the unexpected.”

The Humiliation of Christ

A baby . . . a humiliating death on a cross. No one expected this of God. Indeed, for many in the Greco-Roman world, the sarcastic phrase, “How silly a god to get himself crucified” would have summed it up quite well.

Rome ruled the New Testament world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today’s passage from Philippians, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses “slave” (v.7) – the most dishonorable *public status* one could have, and then “cross” (v.8) – the most dishonorable *public humiliation* one could suffer.¹

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul’s claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

1. This was driven home to me in an article on Christ’s humiliation in the social world of Philippi by J.H. Hellerman in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, v. 160, n. 639 & 640.

Waiting and expecting

Two weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Advent, we faced the darkness and fear that threaten to crush our hope in Christ. Last week, we lifted up Advent as an ever-present reminder that our hope is not misplaced, that Jesus is the fulfillment of promises that God made long before. Today, we turn to the big surprise, the expected arrival of an unexpected God.

The Jews of Jesus day were all about waiting and expecting. For most of the previous five centuries they had chafed under foreign rulers, sometimes even enduring desecration of their temple and of their rituals. And they waited for God to step in, to send a deliverer, to raise up a new king from the House of David, a Messiah, who would defeat the pagan oppressors and cleanse the temple.

The Jews were quite sure how this would all look when it happened. God’s Messiah would arrive in wonder and power and might and glory for all to see. No one could miss the glorious day of God’s great victory and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. All this would be an event for the whole world to witness and to embrace.

Such were the Jews’ expectations. All well-founded in the Hebrew Scriptures. But what did they get instead?

A baby born to a young, engaged mom from the good-for-nothing village of Nazareth in southern Galilee. These were not people of means or of power. Just plain folks. A baby, who is not only the long-awaited Messiah, but is God himself.

The only reason this story doesn’t boggle our minds is that we’ve grown used to hearing it. The shock and surprise have worn off.

None of this, of course, met Joseph's expectations of how his engagement to Mary would go. When he finds out that she is pregnant, he is ready to send her away and end their engagement, until an angel visits him and tells him about God's latest surprise. Joseph has experienced the unexpected God.

And as Paul reminds us in today's passage from Philippians, the unexpected just kept coming. Would Jesus throw out the hated Romans? Did he oust Caiaphas and the

The Christ Hymn

After urging the Philippians to always put the interests of others ahead of their own, in v.5 Paul tells the Philippians, "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Peterson renders it this way: "Think of yourselves the same way Christ Jesus thought of himself." So, the obvious question is – how did Jesus think of himself?

How did Jesus think of himself? Paul answers this question by using the glorious Christ-hymn of v. 6-11. That it is a hymn, sung or not, is widely accepted. Thus, it gives us a peek into the proclamations about Jesus that were made by some of the earliest Christians. Whether Paul composed it or simply used it in his letter, this hymn, this "Christ-hymn," was written before any of the gospels.

Philippians is filled with Paul's teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no "do's and don'ts." We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology! Jesus was "in the form of God" . . . Jesus "emptied himself" . . . Jesus was "found in human form." All this theology.

But this is Paul's way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:9).

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priestly hierarchy? No, none of this. Instead, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross" (2:8). Later, Jesus' disciples would claim that his faithfulness, even to the point of death, had reconciled all humanity to God. God's victory had been won in the darkness of Golgotha.

None of this was what the Jews expected. Hence, because their expectations were so far off the mark, they couldn't see the truth when he lived and walked among them.

What do we expect?

Advent is not only a time to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' birth 2,000 years ago, it is also a time to prepare ourselves for Jesus' return, his next arrival.

What are your expectations around Jesus' second coming? What will it be like? Will it be such a "show" that no one could miss it? Can you predict its timing? Or the place? Is Scripture a bit like a secret code that we need to unlock in order to foresee clearly his second coming? After all, can't the facts surrounding his first coming be found in the writings of the Hebrew prophets? Not so fast.

Given the recent popularity of the *Left Behind* series, I'm sure that many Christians have a pretty clear-cut image in their minds of just how Jesus' second coming will occur. But the birth of the baby in a manger reminds us that we worship a God well-practiced in the unexpected. Perhaps that is why Jesus cautioned that we are to live Advent lives, ever ready and always prepared for Jesus' return. But like a thief in the night, Jesus said, he would come when we least expect it. Perhaps there is even a Christmas message here about doing a bit more living and a bit less expecting.

The Christ Hymn

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Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. After calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ's selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

Surrendering our rights . . . and gaining it all

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. Sometimes, I think we've about convinced ourselves that we have the inherent right to do whatever we want. Still, Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God's beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn't cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead "emptied" himself, taking on the "form of a slave . . . in human likeness." He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of "form" or "emptying," wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus' surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul's point. As Morna Hooker wrote, "Christ did not cease to be in the 'form of God' when he took the form of a slave, anymore than he ceased to be the 'Son of God' when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is *in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.*" God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. If we want to know what love is like, we can look to the cross.

How does God respond to Jesus' "obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross"? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus *is* Lord. It is he to whom "every knee should bend" and "every tongue confess." Using these stirring words of worship from Isaiah (45:23), Paul points us toward Jesus as the image of the one true God, whose self-sacrifice embodies the meaning of true love. Jesus is to be worshiped. His example urges us on toward loving sacrifices of our own. We are not to cling to our rights and privileges, we are to surrender them for the sake of others. For, this is what God is like . . . and we too are made in the image of God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you expect at Christmas? How much of your Christmas experience is shaped by your expectations? Do you expect that the days leading up to Christmas will be a chaotic whirlwind of activity? Do you expect that Christmas will again be a time when you spend more than you should? How might we reshape our expectations of Christmas and of how God is working in our lives, even in this season of Advent? How could we come to rejoice in a God of the unexpected?
2. Jesus was born in the humblest of circumstances and would, one day be humiliated on a cross. Now, being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with "humiliated." Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!??) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being "humble" v. being "humiliated." Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Colossians 1:15-20 Another Christ-hymn from one of Paul's letters.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 13:3-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 8 Paul appeals to the Corinthians for a collection of money and uses Jesus' humbling of himself as an example(v. 9).</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 45:23 & Romans 14:10-12 To whom will every knee bow and every tongue confess? What does it mean to proclaim that Jesus is Lord?</p>
<p>Friday, Micah 5:2-5 God's promise of one from the house of Judah who will bring security and peace. How is Jesus the fulfillment of this promise?</p>	<p>Saturday, Luke 1:57-76a The birth of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin.</p>

