

OVERTURNING ALL EXPECTATIONS

Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-20

Here's a true story. At a primary school in Mississauga, recently, there was a new boy. The boy was from Syria. Every day in class, he would cause a distraction. He would never sit down. He stood for the whole class and refused to sit down. And not only that. Instead of looking at the teacher and paying attention, he looked up at the ceiling as if he was waiting for something to come down. Try as they did, his teachers could not make him sit down and pay attention to what was happening at the front. The other children found it hard to ignore him and concentrate. Did this boy have ADHD or something? Was he just being difficult? Had he not been properly disciplined and taught at home?

And if this wasn't bad enough, the boy brought the same food for lunch every day – a peanut butter sandwich. The school had a very clear peanut free policy. This was non-negotiable. As much as they tried to communicate this policy and reasoning and as much as they sent his food back home, nothing changed. He kept bringing the same sandwich to school every day just to have the conflict erupt all over again. Could he or his parents not understand? Did they not care about other children?

Well, before I say anymore about what happened next, let's reflect a little on what's been said so far. Sometimes, it's hard for us to imagine there are different ways to look at things, especially when things seem so clear. We have certain expectations of people. When things don't go as expected, the explanations seem quite clear. We can't help but judge people, especially when their actions can affect others in negative ways.

And yet, what if there's a whole other way of looking at things? What if there's a whole other explanation that can totally change the way we see others and interpret our world?

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is a popular prophecy about the coming of the messiah, the Christ, the king all Jews were waiting for who would save them and their world. But what were their expectations? They had been overrun, beaten down and oppressed by foreigners. The world was a wicked place of great injustice and vast inequalities. The vulnerable were abused and the powerful took what they wanted with impunity. What kind of messiah was needed? What kind of messiah did they expect?

“The rod of their oppressor, you have broken... for the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore.”

How do we interpret such words? What are our expectations? The oppressors will be defeated by a mighty prince. The child will grow and become even greater than his ancestor David. He will establish peace, a lasting peace and a universal peace like none other. Wow! That sounds awesome. But how can such a peace be possible?

Well, if we're talking about breaking the rod of the oppressor to establish peace... if we're talking about stopping the tramping warriors from harming God's people... if we're talking about authority and might, justice and righteousness... if that's what we're talking about then we must be talking about force and a force greater than that of the oppressor? Is it not through the might of force and the intimidation of force that true peace is possible? Isn't it through a superior strength that justice, righteousness and peace can be achieved?

And yet, what do we get with the child born who is called Jesus? The gospel story offers an account that very deliberately overturns the obvious expectations. The world emperor under whose reign Jesus is born is Augustus Caesar. Augustus' father was Julius Caesar. Julius was called God. Julius had conquered the world. Augustus was called the son of God. He ruled with the kind of power and force the world had never seen. He had established a peace across the empire, a peace that had lasted longer than any before. But it was also a peace that was established by force and maintained by ruthless brutality. Fear kept everyone submissive. How was Jesus supposed to counter that?

The gospel account very deliberately mentions Augustus. It was his requirement that people go to their home towns to be registered. It was for taxation purposes. People had to pay, even if they were really poor. The money collected would go to build up and maintain that vast military complex that kept the empire powerful.

Jesus is born into very opposite circumstances to that of Augustus. His family are not wealthy or powerful. They have no connections and no political support to build up an army of opposition to Augustus. The people themselves are in conflict with different groups vying for power and in conflict as to how to defeat Augustus. Sounds like the world we know today, no? Obviously, we are very fortunate to be here in Canada. But we live in a global village and nothing is totally full proof or secure. Whether it's some kind of environmental disaster, nuclear action and reaction, bombing or attack of

some kind from some deranged terrorist or racist or what have you, or just some accident because we're in wrong place at the wrong time, on the road or at home... whatever it may be, no amount of power or control or security is full proof from many of the vicissitudes of life.

The Christmas story in the bible doesn't shy away from all this. Quite the opposite. It zeros in on it all and challenges us to face it rather than escape it for a little holiday cheer. Only as we go deeper into this story may we find a whole other way of seeing and living that may totally overturn our expectations. Jesus is born into vulnerable poverty. He is a nobody, born to nobody parents, poor and stuck in a difficult situation. And yet, from this place of vulnerability all kinds of other doors may open. What doors?

Let's get back to our story about the Syrian boy. The school finally decided to find an Arabic-speaking interpreter to communicate with the boy. That's when they found out things they never expected. The boy had been taught to never sit down during class and always look up because bombings could take place at any moment. Once the interpreter told the boy he was now in Canada and safe from bombings the boy replied: "How do I know? I don't know that. I was just brought here." The boy needed a lot of patient love and understanding so he could build some trust in his safety. He didn't need judgement. And then, after further conversation it was discovered that the reason the boy brought a peanut butter sandwich to school every day is that this is all the family could get from their food bank. They were very poor. If the boy didn't eat the peanut butter he would just go hungry. What he needed was some food alternatives provided for him. Wow! Who could have guessed all that? Without the interpreter, the school would keep getting it wrong.

But here's the thing. The interpreter was so affected by the boy's story, that she decided to do something. She became involved in helping refugees and other families in crisis and need, especially around Christmas when families feel their privation amid all the buying, consuming and celebrating going on all around them. This boy's story was a catalyst for her to change the whole focus of her life.

And here's where we can find a door opening for ourselves. Sure, one way of defeating Caesar and his rule is by using his methods against him, namely force against force. But what do we put in his place? What kind of justice and peace can we ever achieve this way? Unless, something changes inside to change our thinking and hopefully our living, how can any real peace and change ever be achieved? God comes in the form of a helpless, vulnerable baby born into poverty, not only to wake us up and focus us to where the need is most at Christmas, but also, to call us to creative change in our justice making, peace building.

Why not use Christmas as a time to take the time to understand someone else, really listen, pay attention, make a connection, build a bridge, seek some reconciliation if

that's possible. Whether it's family, a neighbour, a colleague at work or someone else, whether its trying to understand where someone else is coming from or listening to their stories... We can give some of our money, but we can also give ourselves as a gift to others. And in the process of self-giving, quietly and unseen, right under the thumb of Caesar, we are doing our part to build a world of true justice and peace. We can simply give in to the empire's ways and indulge ourselves this Christmas in self-serving consumerist greed oblivious of those excluded, or we can commit ourselves anew to becoming revolutionary agents of God's kingdom. Learning the life skills of self-giving love, radical peace-making and community building, guided by the babe of Bethlehem, we are being transformed even as we are transforming our world.

So how will you celebrate this Christmas? Will you make room in your heart for the Christ child so that change that matters happens in you and through you? Will you follow him into the stables of our world so that you can see the larger picture more clearly and your purpose in it all? Amen.