

Not What We Expected

What Does God Think of My Weakness?

Luke 2:10-12

December 13, 2020

Rev. Dr. Mark J. Toone

On Wednesday, January 12, 1966 at 7:30 p.m., I sat down in front of our black and white Packard Bell TV and, along with every other nine-year-old in America... awaited the television event of the year. Batman! ICON? We who shelled out 12 cents every week for the latest DC comic book could hardly wait for the Caped Crusader to swing into our living rooms.

Only thing, we were expecting one thing but got another. I remember thinking that Robin looked like a sissy and Batman looked wimpy. Where were his bulging muscles? Adam West looked like a sunken-chested accountant, not a super hero. (No disrespect to all you burly accountants out there.) Don't get me wrong, I still watched it every week. But the TV Batman was never quite the superhero I expected him to be.

I wonder if the first witnesses to the birth of Jesus - a group of grubby shepherds - felt the same way? We are in a series called *Not What We Expected*. For hundreds of years, the Jews awaited the coming of a Superhero who would deliver them from their oppressors. But when he arrived... it was not what they expected.

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'"

For centuries, the Jews awaited their superhero. They even had a name for him: "Messiah." "Anointed one." Every king or priest or prophet in the Jewish culture was marked by having oil poured on their heads. It represented the Holy Spirit poured out on them for a holy task. They were anointed.

And the most special of anointed ones - THE Messiah - was long-anticipated. The prophets of God dropped hints about him throughout their writings. It was like teaser commercials reminding us about the next Batman episode: "Same bat-time; same bat-channel." For centuries, the prophets told the Jews to "stay tuned" because the Messiah was coming. Guys like Isaiah:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

The psalms described Messiah as one who would "... defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor." He would destroy his enemies with "...a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Shepherds were near the bottom of the Jewish totem pole. But even the uneducated shepherd knew that the Messiah was going to be a powerful superhero who would deliver them from the Romans.

So imagine their surprise that night. In a blinding blaze of glory, the angels announced that the Messiah, the long-awaited superhero, had been born. *Finally*. But not in a palace in Jerusalem. In a Podunk town called Bethlehem. And they would recognize him because he would be the baby lying in a filthy feed trough surrounded by livestock. They expected a superhero. What they got was small and unremarkable and weak. It just wasn't what they expected.

And it's not like the prophets didn't foretell this part of the story, too. Micah predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Another, Isaiah, predicted that the Messiah would be born to a virgin. And that he would suffer terribly at the hands of his own people. The psalms predicted that he would be crucified. The weakness of the Messiah should not have been so surprising. Yet it was because they preferred the image of a conquering, avenging, Superhero. Who wouldn't? So what happened? Were half of the prophecies wrong?

Our family loves to climb Pinnacle Peak near Mt. Rainier. From the top, you see a huge range of mountains. In fact, it is a series of ranges separated by great distance, sometimes many, many miles. Old Testament prophecy is like that. It looks into the future and everything appears to be at the same time. A powerful, conquering Messiah. A weak, suffering Messiah. Which is it? Well...both. They are just separated. The conquering Messiah hasn't come yet. But the Book of Revelation promises he will! Jesus as warrior and judge. The one who will appear on a great white stallion striking down the forces of evil.

That is coming. There will be a time – someday –when Messiah returns in power, destroys evil, and restores a kingdom that is good and pure and righteous. And don't we long for that? For all things to be set right? For injustices to be avenged? After a year like this one, a year of plague and violence and wildfires and political turmoil, you might be wondering if Jesus' return is imminent. These sure feel like the end times, don't they?

And that time will come. But first, the Messiah came in gentleness. In weakness. Why? Because his first mission was not to conquer. His first mission was to save. Jesus didn't come to destroy the wickedness of humanity. He came to save humanity from that wickedness. John the gospel writer put it this way, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life." The first time Jesus the Messiah came, was on a rescue mission.

And he came to rescue a people who had lived under one cruel oppressor after another. Assyrians. Babylonians. Persians. Greeks. And the cruelest of all, the Romans. For centuries, the Jews suffered and waited, wondering if God had forgotten them.

But God never forgot them. Never stopped loving them. So when he came the first time, he came to save. And how do you save people who have been constantly abused by power? With tenderness. The last thing the Jewish people needed was more power. What they needed, what we all need, is tenderness. The weakness of a child.

But Rome didn't respect weakness. And frankly our world doesn't, either. We respect power. But power is a very tricky thing to handle. I have a rusty park bench that I decided to sand and repaint. Because it was rusty, I decided to use my Craftsman ½ horsepower electric drill with a wire brush attachment. And because it was very rusty, I decided to use the locking button so that I didn't have to hold the trigger the whole time.

Which was great until I pulled the drill back to take a peek, snagged my sweatshirt, and wrapped it around the still-spinning drill. And as it kept running and kept wrapping, the drill started climbing up my shirt and smacking me in the face every time it flipped around. I grabbed it, but that ½ horsepower motor took both hands to subdue, which meant I could not release the lock button. So there I stood.

I could have shouted for help but that would have meant revealing my stupidity to my wife. A hesitation I've obviously overcome since I'm sharing it

with the whole of the internet. But for what seemed like a very long time, I stood there, holding an angry, humming, spinning drill, trying to figure out how to keep it from turning my sweatshirt into a wad of paint rags...with me still in it. I finally managed to reach the button. But my sweatshirt is trashed. It looks like it was worn by Jabba the Hut.

Power is a very tricky thing to handle. Used properly, it can accomplish a great deal. Used carelessly, it can overwhelm you and those around you. It has ever been so. Most people have heard Lord Acton's famous quotation: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But I wonder if you remember the next line? "Great men are almost always bad men..."

We need look no further than our American political scene. Across our country, powerful men and women are doing everything they can to gain power, cling to power, exercise power. And yet, pathetically, we tend to idolize these powerful leaders...and mock the weak ones. We are enthralled with power.

Which makes our love of Christmas somewhat mystifying. Because Christmas is the story of an all-powerful God who set aside his power and chose the way of weakness in order to save an abused and bullied world.

Which raises another question: what then does God think of my weakness? Because we are all weak. We all have areas of vulnerability and pain and shame. We'd prefer to hide these things because we know the world does not admire them. But there is no hiding our real selves from God. So what does God think of my weakness? The answer? He loves it! Because when we have the courage to admit that we are weak, it leads to the next important confession: we are NOT in control!

If COVID has reminded us of anything, it is that we are out of control. Despite the efforts of our best scientists, despite a miraculously quick vaccine, the end is still not in sight. The psalmist once cried, "How long, O Lord!" I have found myself praying the very same thing. How LONG, O Lord? It is helpless to feel out of control, isn't it? But the moment we do is the moment we can finally admit that God IS in control and always has been.

God loves it when we give up the pretense of running our own lives because it allows Him to resume his rightful place as Lord. And when he does, when we admit that God is in charge and we are not, that is such a relief! The apostle Paul once wrote, "When I am weak...then I am strong." When we confess our weakness... our inability... when we admit the inadequacy of our wealth or power or health or schemes... and begin to rely upon all-mighty God... it is amazing what he can do for us... and through us.

So here's my challenge to you: think of one thing in your life you are desperate to control. What are you clinging to? Maybe it's your safety in the midst of COVID. Or your finances. Or your spouse...or child. Maybe it is your political world. What is one thing in your life you are most desperate to control that keeps you awake at night? In a moment, we are going to offer that to the Lord. Confess our weakness. And surrender to His power and his Lordship over everything. I promise, it will be a great relief for you to admit what you already know to be true. You are not in control but God is.

Jesus came to us in his weakness so that we might come to him in our weakness.