

Isaiah 49:1-7
Matthew 24:36-44
“Unexpected Blessings”

How many times in our lives have we done something be it big or little and we receive something that we did not expect? How many times have we taken up a task that we did not want to do, but we received far more than we could ever imagine? In our lives we face many situations where we receive gifts and blessings into our lives totally unexpectedly and without any work on our own behalf. We are blessed by people around us, the people that care about us and care that we ultimately receive the unexpected gifts of life for just being who you are.

When thinking of unexpected blessings, I tend to think of the blessings that we receive through our faith. Many times as a community events will occur that bring the community together and allow us to grow and become closer together. The blessings that come from these relationships can be enormous. They can be totally unexpected and completely wonderful all at the same time.

In thinking about our texts today, I think of the people that the Isaiah text was intended for. Isaiah was a prophet with a long history with the Israelite and Judahite people. In fact the book of Isaiah is so long and exhaustive it has been broken up into three portions, each with their own theme and own ideas for the people in their time and place. It's one of the great works of biblical literature.

The people in the time and place of Isaiah were a people that had many distractions in their lives. I find it to be really difficult to imagine life in the 700 to 500 BC. I do the best I can, thinking of the hardships and struggles that would go on. Many people wouldn't know when their next meal would come or where they would be able to find the resources to meet their basic needs. Never mind the constant threat of invasion from other military powers in the region. It wouldn't take much and your whole entire life could be gone in an instant.

Fortunately in our time and place we don't necessarily live with such uncertainty. We don't have to worry about another power coming through and totally upsetting the social order. Most of us have a steady supply of food and water. Yet when we think of this we must not forget those who don't have such luxuries. We should be mindful of our blessings and never forget how much we truly have in our lives. We should work forward in making sure that our neighbors have their basic needs met and that they can live full and complete lives.

Yet with us knowing that many of our basic needs are met, we can still receive blessings. In my experience as a Resident Assistant in college I will never forget an e-mail that I received stating how the resident felt that they were accepted and had a place at the college because of the work of the RAs. It's little blessings like that which truly make life more enjoyable. I was grateful that as a team of RAs

we were able to accomplish our goal of making every resident feel welcome and a part of the McPherson College community.

Yet with this, I come back to the people of the time of Isaiah. There are portions of the book where the scriptures is set aside as the Servant Songs. These passages refer to a servant of God that does not have a name nor is necessarily a particular person, but represent faith in the midst of struggle. However, I believe that the servant songs point the way to Christ and lay down an understanding of the great wonders that Christ will fulfill in the time that he is on the earth.

In this servant song, we have hope given to the people who were suffering at the hand of the Babylonians. The servant is commanded to bring the people back to God so that they can live in the land they had possession of many, many years ago.

The people at this time felt that hope was lost and they had no way to follow in their world. The people felt that they were suffering at the hand of captors and that they would never be restored to their home in Israel and Judah. Many of the exiled people felt that it would take a miracle for the land of Judah and Israel to be restored. The situation indeed called for a miracle to take place, so that they would be at home in the land of their ancestors and the land of their God.

The thought that I have is, does the servant come into play in all of this? Is the servant unexpected? Is the servant a part of the greater picture that the Israelite

people would understand? Is the servant the person that we would know of as Jesus Christ? To all these questions, I give a healthy yes to all of them.

To the people at the time, the thought of a redeemer would be unexpected due to the heavy imperial power that they were being subjected to. Who could be so powerful that they could be redeemed and sent home? What would you think of if you learned that a person would rise up and be sent to save you from the oppression you are under? It would seem like an unlikely event completely.

In time, the Israelite people were redeemed and able to go home. Cyrus of Persia rose up and defeated the Babylonians therefore allowing the Israelites to go home to their land by the sea. What is peculiar is that the servant song that we read was not applied to Cyrus. Cyrus was called to be a messiah, but it's more like a little "m" messiah, rather than the Messiah that we recognize as Christians.

By most Christian theologians and pastors (I fall into this group) it is believed that this servant song was to prepare the way for Christ. In order to understand the person of Christ and the impact that he would have on society, there needs to be a foundation laid so that we can fully appreciate the coming and unexpected blessing, of our Messiah.

I feel that the coming of the Messiah was indeed indicated for us in the Hebrew Scriptures. The scriptures formulate what this Messiah will look like, so that we know what will be done by this Messiah. We learn that there was a definite

set of indicators of how we could expect the Messiah. However, in all of this we didn't expect the Messiah to come in the fashion that he came into this world. You could almost say that our Messiah didn't match the definition of what we should be thinking of when pondering a Messiah. I believe that this enhances our understanding by forcing us to think outside of the box.

Considering the picture of the Messiah we are given, and then what is next? When does this messiah come forth? Well, the answer to that question is not as simple as it may seem. There is quite a bit to consider when pondering the coming of the messiah. I think it is important to note the great time difference.

The reason the time difference between the prophecy of the Messiah and coming of Christ is difficult to ignore. We are looking at a time difference at the very minimum of 500 years. I always think of how difficult it might have been for the people of the time of Isaiah in imagining a messiah that would come so far off in the future. It would be easy and a reasonable thing to give up on the hope of being freed from the struggles of the world.

I consider the holding on of the Israelite people to the idea of a coming Messiah show us the great faith of the people. It is a testament to the people that they continued to push forward even when the messiah would not help them in their lifetime. They held on to their faith and the hope of the messiah. They kept their faith in the most difficult of times. It is something that we should remember

in our society where we believe that we should receive things instantly and not have to wait for gratification.

When I think of this delay in receiving the Christ, a simple way to imagine this could come in the form of my cousin who is a medical student. He began the journey to become a doctor at the end of high school, where he selected an undergraduate institution that would have a solid pre-medicine curriculum. He chose the University of Central Arkansas as the place where he would major in chemistry with that pre-medicine emphasis. He worked very hard in his school work, so he would be accepted into a medical school.

My cousin John applied to several medical schools near the end of his undergraduate career. There were some disappointments that he did not get into the schools that he wanted to get into, based upon prestige and program offerings. In the end though, he was accepted to attend the University of Arkansas Medical School in Little Rock, Arkansas. He ends his academic journey this year when he graduates after eight years of higher education. Now he is applying to hospitals for residency programs to continue the next part of his journey of becoming a doctor.

I consider my cousin's journey in pursuing his dream of becoming a doctor. Here we have a person that is striving forward for the goal of being formed as a doctor. It's a long, hard journey through school. It is definitely an exercise in delayed gratification. Yet he has told me that in the journey he has had many

unexpected blessings, such as through friendships formed with classmates and new knowledge in areas that he could never have imagined on his own. It is through the journey that he is blessed in the most unexpected ways. He had to wait and work for the ultimate goal, even at the point when the goal of becoming a doctor seems so far away.

So here we come back to the Gospel reading, where we have stated that no one except for the Father knows when Christ will come back to earth. So what do we do until then? What do we hope for until Christ comes back in final victory. This is when it is important to look back at our church history and learn the importance of waiting and having faith in the Lord.

Waiting on the Lord is something that we should embrace as Christians, waiting for the day when the prophecies will be fulfilled and then the complete reign of God's kingdom will be with us. We can experience this anticipation every day as we work in the meantime for justice and work for the Lord here in our and place. We can keep the faith that the ancient Israelites had and truly keep marching forward for that day when the Messiah would come to earth and bring about change and life to the lost and broken people. It is through our faith and hope that we can experience the joy of life through unexpected blessings of faith.

So, considering all of that above here and considering that this is the first week of advent, we are truly at the beginning of our story as Christians. I pray that

as we celebrate this time together that we can be focused on the coming of Christ into our lives and into our hearts.

We can begin the waiting process, but it is not as boring as it may seem. As we wait for the coming of Christmas Eve we can devote ourselves to the study of God's Word and help those who need help the most this season. As much as retailers and corporations want us to focus on the giving of gifts and the acquisition of material goods, we don't have to fall into the worldly trap. We are a people set apart from the world in our faith in Christ, but that does not mean we don't work to help the world in their time of need.

Today I charge Faith church with the work of carrying out the mission of the church this holiday season. Adopt a child from an angel tree, give in your abundance, and study the Words of life that all people can access. It is through our faith of waiting for the Messiah and the waiting of Christ where we can experience unexpected blessings in our life and in the life of others on this earth. Amen.