

Expect the Unexpected from God
Advent 4

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the true Light of the World, Jesus Christ, Our Savior, amen.

Did you notice we had 4 seconds more daylight yesterday than we did the day before? We're now officially past the shortest day of the year, Now all the days will be getting longer for a while. Even nature proves that light always overcomes the darkness... We all know the pattern. The daylight hours get shorter until December 21st. After that, they begin to get longer, until June 21st. Then the daylight starts getting shorter once again.

You might know the pattern, but I wonder how many of us have ever considered why this pattern exists in the first place. Yes, again we know it's because the earth is tilted on its axis. (SLIDE) Science tells us the earth is tilted at a 23.5 degree angle from the plane of its orbit. Because of this characteristic of our planet's axis of rotation we have seasons and this curious pattern of losing light until December 21st and then gaining light until June 21st. That's what science tells us, but the truth of the matter is God created this tiny planet in the midst of all the much more glorious planets. I mean, look at Saturn. (SLIDE) It's magnificent with all its rings. Look at Mars all red and ruddy. (SLIDE) Even in the most basic facts of science and nature you can see the hand of a God who seeks out the unexpected, the unique, the broken. God doesn't just seek out the weird and

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broken, God welcomes the unusual, the lost, the most cracked up to live under the reign of God as if God's Kingdom were already here on earth. If the earth wasn't tilted at all, if it were completely straight up and down, standing tall, there would be no life on this planet. If the earth were tilted at 20 degrees instead of 23.5 degrees, no life... If it were tilted at 25 degrees, no life... At 23.4 degrees the conditions were exactly perfect to set into motion the continual ebb and flow of the tides, the seasons, and the possibility of life.

God seeks out the lost and broken in order to give blessings and to make life come from what we think is beyond repair. Look at Zechariah and Elizabeth.

(SLIDE) A couple well beyond childbearing years. In the ancient times children were considered a blessing from God. They ensured your bloodline would continue, but also, they provided a social safety net for folks in their old age. The children cared for their parents. Those who had no children were thought to be broken or damaged, even forsaken by God. So, doesn't it make sense God would seek out a couple like Zechariah and Elizabeth? This certainly isn't the first time God used an unexpected couple to do great things. **(SLIDE)** Abraham and Sarah were 100 years old when God blessed them with a child. The Bible doesn't tell us how old Elkanah and Hannah were, but only that Hanna could not have children. She prayed for a son and God answered her prayers. **(SLIDE)** The child, Samuel

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grew up to be the priest who anointed both of Israel's first two Kings, Saul and David. There are others in the Bible as well. This isn't anything the people of God hadn't seen before, yet when God acts in our lives, sometimes we still get surprised. My question is, how do we learn to expect the unexpected from our God who is always doing the unexpected? (SLIDE) Like carrying an umbrella on a sunny day...

It was totally unexpected when God tapped me on the shoulder in Alaska. I was at a pretty low point in my life and feeling like a failure when God spoke to me through his angel. I didn't see Gabriel or smoke or even flashing lights (I'm still a little bummed out about that...), but God spoke to me just as surely through the Pastor at the church we had just started to attend. (SLIDE) He spoke words that penetrated my hardened heart and changed the entire path my life was heading. He was God's angel, sent to me on that dark day in a land known for nearly complete winter darkness.

Is God tapping on your shoulder this morning? You probably won't be struck speechless like Zechariah, (SLIDE) but God is nevertheless calling and speaking to you today, maybe even right now. No, you're not too old for God to use you for great things. Moses was 80 years old when God spoke to him through a burning bush. You're not too young either. God used young David, barely a

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teenager, to slay the giant Goliath. You're not too far lost in sin. God used Saint Paul, who held the coats and encouraged the people who stoned the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Paul went on to be the evangelist to the Gentiles and wrote more than two thirds of the New Testament.

There are times when it feels like you're spinning out of control and your axis is not straight up and down. Maybe you're at a time when it feels like the darkness is closing in. The good news for us today is the darkness is in full retreat. (SLIDE) We gained 4 seconds yesterday and we'll gain another 8 seconds today. By the end of the year we'll be gaining over 40 second of daylight. The truly great news is we have a faithful God who still uses the unexpected to do marvelous things. The darkness in your life will not win because God loves you and can't stop loving you, no matter who you are or what you've done or left undone. None of us are beyond God's loving reach. I thought I had run far enough away so God would never find me. I mean, Alaska, the land of perpetual darkness...

I hope you're not actively running away from God. I was a regular Church goer, but I was still running away from God. I guess I thought if I kept attending Church Services and trying to stay faithful, but still flying under the radar, God might forget about me and his call on my life. Just because you're here doesn't mean you're not holding God at arm's length. (SLIDE) Take it from me, there's

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no place you can run. There's no place you can hide. There's no place God can't find you. That's good news because when God finds you He will shower you with His love. He leaves the 99 other sheep on the side of the mountain to seek you out and to bring you home. (SLIDE)

When you encounter God's Holy Angel, I know you'll recognize the messenger and the message. I noticed Zechariah didn't see or hear Gabriel when he was working in the fields. He didn't see Gabriel in his home with Elizabeth. It took the complete aloneness of being the one chosen at random to enter into the Holy of Holies, (SLIDE) the inner Sanctuary of the Temple where only one person can enter only once per year. The priest who was chosen for the honor of burning incense had to have a rope tied around his waist to pull him out if the presence of God overwhelmed him. That's how alone you had to be to enter into the presence of God almighty. I don't know how many times Zechariah had prayed for a son. I assume it was a lot! Now, stripped of all his earthly trappings and totally alone God sent, not just any angel, but his archangel, Gabriel with this message of hope for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

I wish our world would stop all the nonsense and listen to God's Word of Hope this Christmas. I pray you will stop to listen to God's Word of Hope for you. Zechariah and Elizabeth received an unexpected answer to their prayers. They

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were probably looking for a child that would care for them in their old age.

Instead, they received a child in their old age who would be the prophet of the most high God. Their child would be one who would prepare the people for the coming of the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ. (SLIDE) The Lord hears our prayers and answers every one of them. Sometimes we get exactly what we pray for. Most of the time the answer is more like what Aladin gets when he makes a wish to his Genie. (SLIDE) It's usually an unexpected answer. In Alaska I prayed for a better assignment that would use my gifts and talents better than I was currently doing. Instead of a better job, I received an invitation into a completely different vocation.

When your life is spinning out of control and you're totally off your axis, remember you are not alone. Even our planet is with you. (SLIDE) The good news for you today is in those times when you're spinning out of control, God will find you and God will invite you, with all your personal baggage, into a relationship of love. When you enter into that relationship, God will open your mouth to speak, just like old Zechariah. May you own your quirks. Instead of being a scarlet letter you wear on your chest of all your failings, may your slightly off kilter axis become your strength in Christ and may God use all your mistakes and errs to proclaim the glory of his love and forgiveness.. (SLIDE) Merry Christmas! Amen.