

Expect the Unexpected

Sunday 30th November 2025

Call to Worship: Psalm 122, Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44, Romans 13:11-14

St. John's, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

Turn to the person next to you and ask: What was the last unexpected surprise you got? What made it positive or negative?

At the beginning of our building process we had a wonderful and unexpected surprise. When the electricians stripped the wires from the old building they sold the copper for recycling and got a significant sum back. They returned this to Steve for the church building fund. We were understandably delighted as it was completely unexpected. There is something about getting unexpected surprises that we like. At least, when they are positive we like them. Sometimes we get unexpected surprises that are not quite so pleasant; like opening a web page that is not what you expect or finding out your car needs an unexpected repair or that you have a medical condition you didn't know about. Sometimes we get surprises that really shouldn't be surprises. If for example you get a parking ticket and then letter after letter demanding payment of the penalty and you ignore it, then what will come next shouldn't be a surprise. We all, to some degree, procrastinate and put off things we shouldn't. Sometimes the consequences can be serious. The New Testament writers were highly motivated to ensure people knew about Jesus, that He is coming back and what our responses to Him will determine our destiny. These writers us to be ready for Jesus return in a way that their generation had not been ready when Jesus came as an infant. They saw that God is working out His plan and they wanted the following generations to be ready.

Why were they so motivated? Many of them had walked with Jesus on earth. They had seen His teaching, His life, His miracles, His power over everything. After His death and resurrection they recognised that everything that Jesus had taught was going to happen was going to come true. But were people going to be ready? The consequence of not being ready was too awful to contemplate: an eternity without God. [Video song]

Obviously, people wanted to know: when will Jesus return? It is almost the identical question to that asked by God's people before Jesus was born. They asked: when will the Messiah come? Many had given up any real expectation of the Messiah coming – that's why so many of the Sadducees and Pharisees were caught so off guard by Jesus. They had ceased to believe that Messiah would come. Then He did. Today many have drifted away any real contemplation of Jesus returning or from believing the Messiah will come. If you knew absolutely that Jesus was returning this afternoon what would you do? What would you want to change?

The gospel writer Matthew recorded Jesus words: “[A]bout that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus

went on to warn the people that when He returns it will be as it was in the days of Noah, people were eating and drinking and carrying on life as normal. They knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. Jesus used the stark image captured in the song: Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore Jesus told them : keep watch, be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. No one will be saved by the faith of another, no matter how close, each of us are accountable before God alone. Jesus wanted to make sure people knew this.

The apostle Paul would later go on to expound this further addressing the practical issue that arose for people: how would an expectation of Jesus' return impact one's life here and now? What does it mean for me now? Paul responded by telling them they were to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. What would this look like? It meant behaving decently, not in getting drunken or involved in inappropriate partying and all that goes with it. It meant deliberately avoiding sexual immorality, arguments and jealousies. In other words: avoid inappropriate lifestyle choices not worthy of Jesus. Jesus' followers would be identified by how they emulated Jesus, rather than how they chased after the things of the world. Specifically, Paul told the people not to gratify the desires of the flesh. The term for flesh, *sark* in Greek, was typically used by Paul to contrast those things in our lives that wanted to pull us in directions opposite to the things of God and the Spirit. What in your life pulls you away from serving God or being the type of person God wants you to be? While we live in this world we will have the constant tension between the spiritual and the physical but overcoming is what the Spirit gives us the power to do. It is time to get things sorted, to get your life in order and make sure it stays that way.

How do we do that? We start by confessing our sin to God in prayer. We ask, daily for His forgiveness and direction so that we can walk as He wants us to. Regularly attendance at worship and fellowshipping together with God's people is central to who we are. We need to be constant learners, disciples, reading God's Word, learning and praying together with others. We have to be an active participant in God's work, alongside His people, our brothers and sisters in faith. Christianity is not a spectator sport.

Our readings today, at the start of Advent, point us and remind us of what is yet to come. When Jesus comes again, this time, it will be very different. There will be a time of Tribulation that will last seven years. Jesus will call His followers to Himself. The world will go through a time of great struggle and difficulty for the world as people progressively align themselves with or against God. There will be the rise of great evil which Jesus will overcome. When He has done so, Jesus will restore His people and Jerusalem will take on a fascinating new role. The prophet Isaiah tells us that Jerusalem will be restored and will physically rise to be on the highest mountain on

earth. Mt Ruapehu is 2897m tall. Mt Everest is almost three times higher at 8848m tall. Jerusalem will be pretty high! From there Jesus will reign for a thousand years and people from all nations will stream to Jerusalem.

When all this happens it will be shocking. For some it will be terrifying, but for those who believe, it will be a time of adjusting and recognising that God is doing what He would said He would do. Isaiah gives us this wonderful picture that when all this happens **“The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Jesus will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”** Then we will begin to see that world as God intended it to be.

At the start of Advent, the season of remembering Jesus' birth, we are reminded to keep out eye on the big picture. The One who came to surprise kings and religious leaders will come again in an equally surprising and unexpected way, even after all the warnings and planning. Who will be ready? God is full of surprises and there will be a few more in store for us yet. So, with God and man, we have to expect the expected, to be unexpected!

Amen