

12th December 2021 – 10am service

Sermon (Revd. Andrew Attwood)

I just wanted to share a little bit about Christmas at this time, focusing a little bit on what Dave was saying just there about the unexpectedness and the interruption of Christ's coming.

So here we are, again, with our lives rudely interrupted by the pandemic. I wonder how you are with interruptions? When you make your plans and something comes along to disrupt things how do you generally react? Now I can remember, decades ago, when I was a youth worker in Derby, planning this big, elaborate event, and so many things went wrong went wrong: with the tech, some people didn't turn up to do their bit, and I got really irritable and uptight which completely undermined the integrity of the whole thing. I wasn't very good with those kinds of unexpected changes. But some people quite like the unexpected, but others prefer to have a clearer idea of everything. Otherwise, life feels upsetting and confusing. Globally, we've had to continuously adapt for the last two years now. And it's my guess that it's taking its toll on many of us. It may be annoying, upsetting and challenging.

But perhaps God is trying to get our attention. Think of the story: so Mary gets the shock of her life when a majestic angel appears to her out of thin air in Nazareth. And his news about a divine baby is even more unexpected, crazy, irrational. And yet amazingly, somehow Mary holds her nerve and goes with what seems to be from God. I think Mary is incredible in the face of the unexpected. Then, Joseph, of course, finds out that she's pregnant and understandably goes into logical mode: bit of a bloke. The baby wasn't his, so she's obviously been unfaithful to him. But because he's a decent, and kind man, he chooses to divorce her quietly, because betrothal was already like marriage in that culture. But then *he* gets a very unexpected interruption, a dream, where an angel tells him things which were really difficult to understand. But it did confirm much of Mary's crazy story. So probably to Mary's surprise he goes ahead with the marriage, despite everyone being able to work out the dates, which would show he wasn't the dad. Joseph did really well with this dramatic interruption into his life plan. Next, God even organises the Emperor Augustus, to take a census of his whole domain, so that the mother of the Messiah happens to be in Bethlehem when her firstborn arrives. So I guess Augustus wasn't actually in charge of the Roman Empire. And Mary wasn't in charge, and Joseph wasn't in charge. All of this would have been a very big unexpected interruption a star playing

[Lindsey pours a glass of water over Andrew's head.]

Ach! Good grief! Let me try and carry on, shall I?

The shock of discovering that God is free to interrupt and change things. It's just, it's just really, really difficult. It's really, really difficult. But it's, it's like, it's like what do you do? You start to realise that God actually is free. All this information about Christ's arrival was a heartstopping shock. Even heaven couldn't contain itself. We just heard from Callum and Ellie that in Luke 2 [vv 1-20], it describes an angel party spilling over onto a Bethlehem hillside, completely freaking out the local shepherds. They were probably dozing while the sheep slept through the night. And it would have been a big enough shock, I'm guessing, to probably

require a bit of a medical checkup later. Hundreds of shining beings in the sky with one of them talking to you about a baby in a feeding trough, all out of the blue and another unexpected interruption.

But what about you? Do you welcome the liberty of God to interrupt your life? Or is there a sense of dread that if God did turn up in some way, it might be scary or destabilising? Maybe in your life you have actually had some shocks that were actually terrible or heartbreaking. I'm sure that some of those shocks bring no good at all. But are you actually open to the God of heaven acting unilaterally, having his way in a manner outside of your comfort zone? You see, the whole of God's plan from Abraham onwards didn't fit into any human neat, predictable pattern. God had repeatedly shown himself to be free to act how he chooses, because He's God. Yet it was a growing surprise that every time God acted, He was revealing a bit more about what He was like. For example, God initiates the sacrificial system at the temple and it shows it shows Him to be holy, but also it shows him to be longing to be close, even though Israel was a sinful people. Through young David, God shows Himself to be stronger than all the Goliath this world. Through Hosea, God showed himself to be the loving husband that the human race had always needed, despite our inclination to turn away to others. God's big loving heart was coming to the fore.

[Lindsey grabs Andrew and kisses him forcefully on his cheek]

Okay! Grief! Oh, man!

What is going on!

To our surprise, the coming of Jesus is wonderful, loving news beyond all our hopes and dreams. When Christ did come, it was at first hard to comprehend. But it began to dawn on Mary, Joseph and then Mary's cousin Elizabeth that God Himself was joining the human race. This was astonishingly great news! God was becoming one of us! How alone do we feel at times? I don't know if you're like me, but how alone do we feel with our troubles when they overwhelm us? God, according to the nativity, God was turning up to be on our team. Instead of the lonely pain of being out of our depth, unable to deal with circumstances, God through His one and only Son was coming into the world to lead the way. And he was coming to show God's powerful love. God was no longer speaking from on high. He was alongside us. He was close enough to touch us. He came with the greatest display of care and compassion the world has ever seen. And this baby, this Jesus carried power to actually change things: healing the sick, setting people free from oppressive evil. And there's a final crescendo: God's love glowed to its brightest yet: Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, perfect and innocent, walked headlong into the hands of the enemy. At Jerusalem, all the wickedness of the world mounted up and forcibly struck the Mashlach, Messiah. He was rejected, flogged and nailed to a humiliating cross, all in our place. And from the agonising cross he cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Despite our culpability, despite our naïve ideas about how bad or good you think we are, Jesus stepped into the place of punishment, and became God's loving sacrifice. Remember those lines, "God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have eternal life." And Jesus is revealed. God is love. God is love revealed in Jesus Christ, especially in His death.

[While Andrew continues talking, Lindsey plasters something looking like cream cheese on Andrew's head, and then adds glacé cherries.]

You see, this unexpected interruption changes everything, including our hearts and willingness to do whatever sovereign God wants. A Sunday dawned with the discovery of the tombstone rolled away: another massive shock was in store, another unexpected interruption, the one who had been cruelly sacrificed for us all was patiently alive again. This kind of shocked leads to delirious responses amongst the delighted disciples, they're both filled with joy and disbelief. It was simply too good to be true, but unmistakably true nevertheless. So they went about for the rest of their days, prepared to be fools for Jesus Christ, delighted to tell all that God is love. Joyfully saying that Jesus had overcome sin, and death shouting out to all that Jesus is alive forever. So, so the disciples where now part of God's unexpected interruption, and for 2000 years, disciples have continued to join in with God's interruptions.

What about you? Here we are still in the interrupting pandemic. Are you listening? This strange Christmas, has God got your attention today? Has His love smacked you in the face? Has His affection marked your life so that everyone can see? Has his sweet and rich message changed what you're prepared to do? Even if it makes you look stupid? Today, can I invite you to be open to the God who acts, the God who unexpectedly interrupts.