

According to the standards of the world they were both the wrong people to be chosen. This would not be the way things were supposed to be accomplished or done. There were traditions to be kept, rules to be followed and standards to be upheld. This is not how the world is supposed to work! We all have certain expectations for people, how they are to act. We have certain expectations of how history is to be played out and want to control it from our perspectives—God has a whole different set of expectations!

David, an unlikely shepherd, is called to be king. David was the last of the sons of Jesse (1 Samuel 16). When the prophet Samuel comes to anoint a son of Jesse to be the next King of Israel, Jesse leaves David in the field with the sheep. He does not even consider bringing David in from the fields – Samuel had asked for all his sons, but David is the youngest, only good for serving as shepherd, and his other sons are ahead of David according to the traditions. Why waste good time and bring him to the party? After all he is not the one to be chosen – whatever Samuel has in mind David is not invited to the party – Jesse does not see the need.

As the sons of Jesse pass before Samuel none of them is the one. Samuel is a bit confused. Was he not told to anoint a son of Jesse? Do you have any more sons? “Well, yes, there is the youngest – he is out with the sheep.” David is not even on Jesse’s radar, that God would consider him. I mean, is it not the firstborn who has all the rights and privileges? There are traditions to be kept. However, Samuel will not continue until David is brought in from the fields – then, as David goes before Samuel, the prophet is told to anoint him with the oil of God’s choice. Imagine the surprise of Jesse and David’s brothers?

Did you note Nathan’s words to David in our text for today? *“I took you from the pastures, from following the sheep to be prince over Israel” (7:8b)*. Had tradition had its way, Jonathan, Saul’s son would be king – and David would still be a shepherd watching over sheep. Nathan reminds David that God has been with David his entire life. David’s successes are only because of God’s presence. What David accomplished has been because of God, not because of David – except for David’s willingness to be what God had called him to be.

Mary was a nobody in the world in which she lived. She was young, poor and engaged to a carpenter, a common man. She was not one of the elite of the world or even of the religious community. The magi, when they come to find the newborn king, head for the palace of Jerusalem. Why would they go to Bethlehem? There is no palace or king there. Why would they look for a carpenter and his wife? This goes far beyond what the world or they expected. Kings are not born in stables. Kings do not have mangers for beds nor are they wrapped in strips of used cloth. Kings are wrapped in the finest linens and silks. Kings do not chase chickens around the yard while mom cooks and dad works in the carpenter's shop. This is not how any of us would have written either story.

Advent is our reminder that our God is full of surprises. Surely David was surprised to be chosen King over Israel. He was the youngest, destined to be the shepherd. He was last on the list for anything. Yet, in a single moment God changes his life forever. Samuel anoints him with oil and God’s spirit rests upon him. He

now is no longer David, the shepherd – rather he is now David, future King of Israel, chosen by God.

Any reading of the Christmas story should bring us surprises. Nothing is done the way we would have expected. A young girl, a virgin, is engaged to a carpenter in a remote village. She becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit and is faced with the consequences. After her hurried marriage she is expected to travel to a strange town, Bethlehem, because her husband is from there. She gives birth in the only place where there is room and privacy—a stable, and then uses the only piece of furniture present, a manger, for the baby’s bed. Royal robes are strips of used cloth and royal music is angels singing and animals baying. Obscure parents give birth and magi from the East come seeking a king in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem.

Our New Testament reading is Mary’s statement of faith in a situation no one ever expected. *“Here am I, let it be with me according to your word” (1:38)*. God asked and Mary accepted her role in God’s drama. Her faith was stronger than one would have imagined. A young girl, promised in marriage, brings disgrace on herself and her family. Her future husband, Joseph, had thought of divorcing her. How could they live under such shame? Yet, Mary believed in the impossible surprises of God. She took on a task that would forever change the world – a task that would have eternal implications. God surprises – God chooses in ways that we find impossible to comprehend.

Look at a couple of other examples. John Newton is transformed from one who trades in slaves to one who would write “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” No one around John Newton would have seen his dramatic conversion and the power he would become for the Kingdom of God. Certainly not his fellow sailors nor the slaves in the cargo hold of his ships.

William Carey was a humble cobbler/shoe maker – and poor at that, from some reports. Yet, God reached out and called William to India where he became the leader of our modern day missionary enterprise. It was to William Carey that the Judson’s would go when they reached India, to be baptized (another whole sermon). Who would have thought that this poor cobbler from England would be one who would be a part of changing the world for the Gospel?

Are we willing to be surprised by God this Advent? Or, have we built up our traditions as fences? Have we put our God in a box and can’t allow God to do anything other than what we expect according to our traditions?

We want to know what to expect—and God smiles and says, “Guess what?”

We want the journey to be all mapped out—and God puts up the detour signs.

We have decided how things are to go and God smiles and shouts, “SURPRISE!”

May we be like Mary and David and the countless others who have heard God’s call on their lives this Advent. And when God comes by and says, “You will be...” May our response be: *“Here am I, let it be with me according to your word.”*