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Come Thou Unexpected Jesus: Elusive Clarity

Zechariah 9:9-12; Luke 22:47-53

Today marks the end of our series of sermons, through which we explored some key Biblical moments when Jesus was, quite simply, not who people wanted him to be.

As his ministry began, he was faced with years of tradition, scriptures, teachings and laws which had culminated into a clear messianic expectation. The Israelites were expecting a very certain savior. And yet, as we have explored, Jesus seemed to have little interest in fulfilling that expectation. Jesus' mission did not appear to be one of human appeasement.

In today's passage, we witness the moment Jesus faced his arrest.

Before we begin to explore the happenings of this occurrence — first, some context:

Jesus and his disciples had just shared the Passover meal — the first communion (Luke 22:19-20).

Jesus then took his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed for another way — a foreshadowing of his looming arrest and crucifixion (Luke 22:36-46).

And just before today's passage, Jesus was face to face with his friend and betrayer as the crowd approached (Luke 22:47-48).

The guards arrived, heavily armed, perhaps anticipating a fight, perhaps simply as show of power — an intimidation tactic.

But then, something shocking happened. One of Jesus' disciples pulled out a sword and cut the ear off the servant of the high priest. There are layered reasons this reaction may have occurred, not the least of which was the attempted protection of a beloved and important rabbi.

But remember, we are exploring the tension between messianic expectation and the reality of Jesus. So, through this lens, in order to understand why this disciple may have reacted the way he did, let's take a moment to further parse out the historic influence.

Our first text is from the book of Zechariah, and it paints the picture of a peaceful king, one who will end the war, release captives, and restore peace, but this promise of peace is bookended with violent imagery. This warfare language takes root in Zechariah 14, which focuses primarily on violent battles and peace as won through victorious warfare.

Without overloading you on historical context, there are a few key things that are helpful in understanding this prophesy.

Before this was written, Israel had been under Babylonian rule.

As a way of asserting dominance and control, Babylon would assimilate conquered lands by taking people of strength or importance away from their communities and dispersing them into Babylonian lands.

It was an excruciating time — so many of the Hebrew texts are touched by this tragedy, this loss, as was much of their understating of God and the world in which they lived.

Zechariah, however, was written at a time of profound political shift. In 539 BCE Persian leader, Cyrus, overthrew Babylon. His strategy for conquered peoples was markedly different from the Babylonians. He repatriated them. He sent them home. So, this book was penned at a time when the intense suffering of before seemed to have finally come to an end. The Israelites were once again able to worship — they were able to go home.

They quickly began the reconstruction of Judah, but for an unknown reason, they suddenly stopped (Ezra 4:4-5;5:13-16).

This is where we find this second part of Zechariah, which

[Sounds] a strong note of hope for the Jerusalem of the future...[while revealing] a pattern of steadily increasing disillusionment with the post-exile polity and a sense that the glorious vision of a just society... was not going to be achieved by a priestly-Davidic establishment centered in Jerusalem. Second Zechariah offers images of a coming new age of holiness and peace, brought in by Yahweh alone...¹

¹ W. Sibley Towner, *Harper Collins Study Bible*

Jesus' disciple would know this history, this prophecy, this call to victory.

And there's one more factor which surely would have influenced the disciples' certainty in his action.

Just before this event, there's a passage in which Jesus told his disciples to sell their cloaks and buy a sword (Luke 22:35-38).

So, now this disciple, bolstered by a long prophetic tradition, was wielding his sword, ready for the foretold battle.

Yet, shockingly, he was stopped by Jesus, who healed the servant's ear, was arrested and taken away.

Now, it's at this point in this series that I have said something like: So, that's the backstory. Now, I would like for us to enter into curiosity— what was this moment like for Jesus?

But instead, I find myself as confused as I presume this disciple to have been.

Why does Jesus seem to say such vastly different things so close together? What's going on here?

Well, one factor:

In the beginning of Luke, upon the announcement of her pregnancy, Jesus' mother, Mary sang a song of prophetic revolution (Luke 1:46-55), which was reminiscent of Hannah's song of militaristic victory in 1 Samuel (2:1-10).

Perhaps she continued to sing that song to him as a lullaby through his childhood...

Perhaps that revolution story was in his blood, intermingled with these prophetic visions of Zechariah and of Hannah.

So perhaps the moment the guards appeared was a moment of choice for Jesus.

The swords were drawn, the devotion of those willing to fight all around him, the ancient drumbeat of triumph and dominion from sea to sea (Zechariah 9:9-10) pounding in the heartbeat of his humanity.

Was Jesus making a decision here?

And did he heal the servant in an act of choosing peace? Or was that the plan all along?

The truth is, we don't know.

When I launched this series — this series about Jesus not conforming to the ideas of who the messiah ought to be — the last thing I expected was for Jesus to refuse to conform to my ideas for this series.

But the actual shock here is that I was surprised.

How often do we do that? We read and study, we attend worship and seminary and we take really good notes, and somehow we think that we can now discern the fabric that makes up the divine.

As though all those years ago, the pharisees and the synagogue leaders (who, interestingly enough spent much of their time reading and studying, attending synagogue and temple and probably taking really good notes) as though they missed something we now fully comprehend.

As though *we* can decipher what those who walked with Jesus could not.

And yet, today in these texts, the thing I seem to understand most is the disciple's confusion.

What was Jesus thinking?

Perhaps this was all logic: in that moment the limitations of violence so obvious to Jesus — these few men with their few swords were simply not going to overturn the Romans.

Perhaps a skirmish here would have stifled the true revolution — this movement of the new faith ended before it began.

But perhaps, when the moment finally came and his disciple launched into battle mode, Jesus was simply overcome with love?

Love for the disciple who would have surely been killed, love for the servant who came to arrest him.

You see, in all these stories we have encountered over the last few weeks, the common thread through each of the moments was love.

When Jesus spoke to his hometown and revealed who he was, inviting them to know him better, and enter into the year of jubilee through his presence (Luke 13:10-17)

When he shouted across the temple to heal a woman overwrought by physical agony, and in the same moment, explained his actions, building bridges for those who did not understand (Luke 4:14-28).

And again today, as Jesus healed someone he had no earthly requirement to heal — a man whose job was to perpetuate injustice upon Jesus himself — and as he, in love, saved his disciples even at the cost of his own life.

We can argue reasons Jesus said different things and we can argue which prophet was the most correct but what we cannot argue is Jesus' divine love.

So if all you get out of this series is an assurance that even in our lack of human understanding, the one thing of which we can be absolutely certain is the unending, unconditional, absolute love of God as reflected in Jesus. Because God *is* love.

Love won.

And here's what I am sure of — through Christ, love always wins.

So to end this series, my invitation is less of imaginative wandering through the scriptures and more of a prayerful wondering.

Let us welcome the mystery of this God who exists even within our desire to know.

Let us recognize the humanity of Jesus even in the complex coexistence of the unknowable God dwelling within him.

Let us accept that even in the moments we desperately wish we had concrete answers, and we jump into whatever action we hope is right,

God is there, patiently placing their hand on our shoulder telling us: that's enough, I have a bigger plan here. You don't have to know it all, just know me, and know my love.

Can we still believe when clarity is elusive? I think so, because universal answer is love.

Amen and Amen