

Something Unexpected Happened by Donne Hayden

For many of us, what we love most about Christmas are the traditions. Certain foods and smells, particular ornaments, certain trees that we remember—special ways of getting the trees, or the artificial tree or the tumbleweed tree Mom made one year. If we like Christmas at all, it's probably because we associate these annual traditions with good things related to family and friends. Still, because we are so careful to preserve the traditions, many Christmases blur together in my memory—each time the family gathered, we ate the same foods and did the same things in the same place; the only thing that changed was that each year, everyone was older. If I had to tell you about one of those Christmases, I couldn't really do it, I couldn't isolate one Christmas from all the others like it. No, the Christmases I remember are those that were different somehow, those in which something unexpected happened.

For instance, the Christmas of 1971. At that time, I was married and living with my husband, Bob, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In September, our daughter, Krystin, was born. My husband's family was in Michigan, too far for us to go in the three days he had off at Christmas, so we planned to spend the holiday with my parents who lived about 70 miles southeast of Albuquerque. Their house perched on a windy hill out in the middle of nowhere on the high plains, fourteen miles from the nearest village and two miles off the pavement. Both my parents had grown up in the country, so the cozy house on a hill suited them. Dad, who was disabled, stayed home and laboriously refinished antiques; Mom worked for the weekly newspaper, and my brother, who was only seven, rode the bus to school and joined 4-H.

As it happened, the week before Christmas that year, a big snowstorm swept through New Mexico. If you've never seen snow on the high plains, you may not be aware of how deep the drifts can be. But Krystin my daughter was a little over three months old, and I was determined that we would spend her first Christmas with family, so I was on the telephone with my mother back and forth several times through the storm; we kept close track of the road and weather conditions.

By Christmas Eve, the storm had passed and the highways were clear, so after my husband, Bob, got off work, we drove from Albuquerque to the turn-off to the dirt road up to Mom & Dad's house. This was in the days before cell phones, so we had agreed that Mom would keep watch out the window for our headlights—yes, she could see two miles to the paved road—there are no trees on the plains. When Mom saw our headlights, Dad would drive down to meet us in the pick-up, which had 4-wheel drive.

As Bob turned off the highway to park on what was usually a dirt road, our light-weight Camaro slid off into the ditch, hood-deep in snow. Over the hill ahead of us, however, we saw headlights coming toward us and knew Dad was on his way. When he reached us, Bob unloaded all the gifts from our car into the back of the pickup, and I bundled up the baby and climbed into the cab of the pickup beside Dad. When Bob got in the truck, Dad pulled up to the highway, turned around and headed back toward their house. A few feet past our car, however, the pickup slid off into a high snowdrift and there we were. Stuck.

It was cold and dark, and there was nothing to do but walk the two miles to the house. We got out and clambered up the snowdrift to walk the barbed wire fence line along the road. I carried the baby; she swaddled in blankets in a little yellow down sleeping bag, all zipped up nice and warm. Dad struggled the best he could with Bob's

occasional help, and Bob carried a few things from the car. As we crunched through the snow, I heard other crunching and turned to look over my shoulder and see three horses ambling toward us, curious, no doubt about this unexpected company. It flashed through my mind that we could, perhaps, ride them. But with no halter, bridle or saddle, that wasn't really an option.

So there we went, trailing across the snowy plains toward a light on a hill, a man and woman with a baby, an old man, followed by three horses. Above us the stars glittered magnificently—there is no starry sky like the starry winter sky in New Mexico. I held my baby close and lost myself in the image. It wasn't really like Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus, but it was so much closer than I ever imagined I'd get!!

Then, something unexpected happened. I was walking ahead of everyone else, carrying the baby. Behind me shuffled one of the horses, then Dad, then my husband followed by the other horses. As we got closer to Mom's & Dad's house, I started to cross the barbed wire fence we had been following and go down onto the road. I put my foot on the bottom wire and, holding the baby in one arm, reached to pull up on the top wire so I could lean over and step through. All of a sudden, my daughter flew up, up high and over my shoulder; up, up and up she rose, with me reaching up, holding onto her as best I could. For an instant, I had the irrational thought maybe God was taking her back. It's funny now because nothing happened, but it was terrifying at the moment. It was a few seconds before I realized what was happening: the horse behind me had grabbed her blankets and yanked her up. I tugged back and got her away from the him; luckily, zipped in her little sleeping bag, she didn't fall out and was not hurt, but I almost had a heart attack. Needless to say, it completely destroyed the mood of wonder I had felt. But it was a *memorable* Christmas.

Here is another example of a Christmas made memorable by the unexpected. This comes from Maria Graves, a Quaker in Michigan:

One year, our family went down to Choctaw Indian Friends Center to deliver packages that our meeting had collected for them. As a college student, I remember that I was more interested in staying home to catch up with my high school friends than driving to a strange place with my parents. But I went, and on Christmas Eve, we stayed in a dark, cold lodge, ate a simple meal, and slept on hard bunks. I had trouble getting to sleep because I was uncomfortable, unhappy, and in a strange place. Then it occurred to me how much more so Mary must have felt that first Christmas Eve when she was away from home, no place to stay, and in labor! She must have been very lonely and scared.¹

As I was thinking about all this, it occurred to me that what happened in Israel all those years ago was something unexpected, and in fact, this is often how the Spirit works. To talk about this, I am going to tell the Christmas story a little differently than is traditional, and I hope it does not offend anyone.

First, let me tell you what *was* expected by the unhappy Jews in Israel two thousand years ago. They were unhappy because, having once been a sovereign nation with their own king, they had for centuries now suffered under the rule of various emperors and despots. They did not like being ruled by the Roman Empire. Things were so bad, many Jews believed, that the only way to fix things was for God to destroy it all and start over. Thus an entirely new idea arose—the apocalypse, the end of the world.

¹ Quakers and Christmas, Quaker.org website.

Believe it or not, this was a *new* idea. Of course, the idea was that God would put things right and the Jews would once again be a sovereign nation.

One group of Jews lived in expectation of “a national king” in the lineage of David, Israel’s greatest king hundreds of years earlier; this coming king would restore Israel as a sovereign power so it could take its rightful place among nations. Another group anticipated a *world* savior who would work even with the Gentiles, also of the Davidic line, who might be either a king or a priest or both ruling together. And this one might be preceded by a great prophet like Moses or Elijah. All these figures were expected to usher in the end of history as it was and the chance for God to set things right.

In his book *The First Coming*, Dr. Thomas Sheehan of the Jesus Seminar says that:

Moreover, all of these figures tended to take on one another’s traits and often to blur into one another in a complex spectrum of awaited saviors.

It was an apocalyptic’s dream, frequently confusing but burning with hope and with heightened expectation that something momentous was soon to happen.²

They expected something *great*. No one expected what actually happened. What actually happened is that a child, born to peasant parents in a remote backwater of the Empire, grew to be a man and began teaching when he was around thirty years old. This Jewish man spoke Aramaic and was named “Yeshua,” and his mother’s name was

² Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*. (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 47-48.

“Miriam.” They lived in Palestine, “the ‘boondocks’ of the Roman Empire,”³ not even in one of the nicer neighborhoods. Yeshua was probably born and apparently raised in Nazareth, a village in Galilee:

a beautiful region north of Judea and Samaria relatively remote from the provincial capital of Jerusalem.

Galileans were considered uncultured, semi-pagan, of mixed blood, and open to foreign influence. They had developed the reputation, probably justified, of fostering revolutionary anti-Roman sentiment and activity . . . Religiously, the Galileans were a patchwork of competing sects: there were the fiercely traditionalist, priestly Sadducees [think “conservative”]; the “liberal” lay, reformist and often self-righteous Pharisees; the radically ascetic, priestly and perfectionist Essenes; and the politically revolutionary Zealots.⁴

I like to imagine what sort of place today might hatch a Messiah—if the U.S. is like the Roman Empire, then Galilee might be like one of the northern regions of Iraq or perhaps Cuba—the last place you would expect a great “savior” to come from. Certainly not where we would turn our attention if we expected God to send someone to “fix” things.

This Yeshua came out of nowhere and was *not* what anyone expected. Regardless, his teachings and his example rocked the world and have done so for over two thousand years. Like it or not, believe in him or not, his influence has lasted for over two thousand years.

³ Paul Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't*. (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000), pages 77-78.

⁴ Laughlin, page 78.

He was so unexpected that even after he lived, taught and died, people found it necessary to backfill information to make his arrival among us more as we humans would expect it—give it some pizzazz, like a virgin birth. “In the ancient world, all sorts of people were believed to have been virgin born, whether or not divinity was attributed to them. Before Jesus, for example, many Mediterranean people believed that the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great had been virgin-born, as well as the philosopher Plato.”⁵ So that Jesus might fulfill the expectations people held of a messiah, however, two early gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—felt compelled to claim a virgin birth for Jesus, and their accounts of the story don’t match. What we usually celebrate as Christmas is a blend of the two accounts: Matthew has wise men following a star to Bethlehem, Luke has angels appearing to shepherds on the hillside—we put it all together and call it “the Nativity.”

In fact, there is little *scriptural* evidence to support anything miraculous about Jesus’ birth. Jesus never mentions it, nor do any of the disciples. “Paul, whose writings are the earliest in the New Testament and who had perhaps the most exalted view of Jesus in his day, never even alludes to it. His only comment about the natal event was that Jesus had been ‘born of a woman’ (Gal. 4:4), a description that suggests no awareness whatsoever of a miraculous motherhood.”⁶ Mark, the earliest gospel writer, makes no mention of a virgin birth. Only Matthew and Luke refer to Jesus being born of a virgin, and despite that, both resort to proving his claim to the lineage of David through Joseph!

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁶ Laughlin, p. 79.

I remember only one thing from my high school biology class. When we were studying reproduction, Mr. Smith told us that every time a normal child is born, it is a miracle. *Every time*— because there are so many things that can go wrong. But we're not satisfied with the miracle we live in all the time, this miracle of life on a blue ball spinning through space. We're not content with that. We want other miracles; we want a different miracle for the birth of our Messiah so we make it go against the miraculous way things are set up here in this life system.

Jesus' teachings are unexpected, too; we find them counter-intuitive ("Love your enemy"?) and difficult to follow. Many prefer instead to turn Jesus into a god and worship him. That is easier than living the way he asked us to live.

No, Jesus was not what we expected. We who live among continuous miracles, prefer the Spirit meet our expectations with some razzle-dazzle, and we are always surprised when it manifests in something unexpected. Even now, we find it difficult if not impossible to believe that, miracle of miracles, Love might incarnate among us, that the Divine might use a simple human being for its own purposes.

My wish for you all is that, in the midst of all the warm Christmas traditions, something delightfully unexpected happens to you this holiday season.