



Answering the Angels

BY **PETER FRIEDRICHS**, LEAD MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF DELAWARE COUNTY, MEDIA, PENNSYLVANIA

I want to acknowledge right up front that the story of the Annunciation, the visitation of Mary from the angel Gabriel as described in the Gospels presents us Unitarian Universalists, with all sorts of challenges. Was Mary a virgin, or simply a young woman of child-bearing age? (It depends on how you translate ancient languages.) Is the primary role of women to bear children? What kind of message does that send our children and youth? Does God communicate with us by sending heavenly messengers?

There are many issues with this story, but I want to invite you to put them aside for the moment. I'd like you instead to hold Mary in a different light. Let's take Mary down from whatever celestial throne she sits on. Let's make her real, or at least more real than she is in the myths and stories that have grown up around her. Mary is a young girl, probably 13 or 14 years old. She's from an ordinary family living in Roman-occupied Judea. Her father is probably a tradesman, perhaps a mason or a cobbler. She is to marry Joseph, the son of a local carpenter. It's an arranged marriage. He's older than she, but he has learned his craft from his own father and will be a good provider. Mary is resigned to her fate, knowing no other possibilities. She's never traveled more than a few miles in any direction outside her village, and all her friends, as well as her older sister, have been married off this same way. Mary doesn't know how to read or write. But her mother has taught her all the skills she needs to make a good home for Joseph and their family. Life, she knows, is hard. The best you can hope for is a few moments of joy within a life that is otherwise filled with hardship. She likely won't live to see 50 and there's a high degree of likelihood that she'll die in childbirth much sooner than that.

So, we have a picture of this young girl living a hard life in a small village. And what happens next is, at least to me, unbelievable. In this little mud home where Mary is perhaps sweeping the dirt floor or mending a dress, there's a flash, and an angel appears before her. Now, we have to assume she was afraid because one of the first things the angel says is "Be not afraid." And we know she's confused, because Luke tells us she was "much perplexed." Really, who wouldn't be?

Then the angel tells her that she has been chosen by God for an especially important task, to give birth to the son of God. She does question him. But Gabriel is the ultimate pitch-man, and it doesn't take long for Mary to say yes. "Here I am," she tells the angel. "Let it be with me according to God's plan." And then he disappears.

Now, I don't want to go into what happened after this miraculous event. To speculate about how she explained this whole thing to her parents. Or even more, to Joseph. Because what matters to me most about this story isn't what it took for her to convince Joseph to stick with her and go through with the marriage, even though she was pregnant. Or whether there was a star in the East when Jesus was born. What fascinates me about this story is that Mary said *yes* to the angel. Think about that. Here we have Mary, a mere teenager, betrothed to a local carpenter. Her future is mapped out before her. She will be an obedient wife to her husband and hopefully bear him many children. It's likely that she'll never leave the little hamlet of Nazareth, that her entire world will consist of a few square miles in and around the village. A simple life. A hard life. Perhaps it is all she ever hoped for; perhaps she would be satisfied with such a life. We don't know if Mary was a dreamer and a hoper, or simply a do-er. But regardless, her whole world was turned upside down in an instant. In one unexpected and uninvited thunderbolt from the heavens, the

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Our brightest blazes
of gladness are
commonly kindled
by unexpected
sparks.

— Samuel Johnson

A monthly for religious liberals

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course of Mary's life was altered forever. The unseen force of the Divine intervened in whatever plans Mary had made (or had been made for her) and told her, in no uncertain terms, "Here is what you need to do." The miracle of this story isn't in the appearance of the angel, or the conception of the child by the Holy Spirit. The miracle was in the fact that Mary said *yes*. "Here I am, Lord. Thy will be done."

I suppose it would be easy to chalk up Mary's response to her youth, to her innocence and her naiveté. Maybe it was her subservience to authority, taught through years of watching her fellow villagers grovel before the Roman guards or watching her mother comply with anything her father said. Mary certainly could not have understood or appreciated what it was she was signing up for when she said *yes* to Gabriel. She could never have anticipated the life that her son would lead, and how he would be put to death much too soon. Had she known how this was all going to play out, I wonder whether she'd have agreed to take on this task? "Can I think about it and get back to you, Gabriel? I need to weigh my options." That seems like a reasonable response under the circumstances.



Few of us are lucky enough, if you can call it that, to be struck by the proverbial bolt out of the blue. Angels don't appear on our doorsteps. Messages from the divine tend to take other, more

subtle forms. Maybe it's a passing thought that occurs to us as we're reading a novel. Perhaps it's a persistent nagging at the back of the mind that's been there since we were kids. It could be a call out of the blue from a long-lost friend. Those are the better angels, really. Our calling might also come from experiences that aren't so nice. Being fired from our job. The sudden end of a relationship. Having a near-death experience that opens our eyes to new possibilities.

More than likely, receiving our call, or finding our purpose if you're more comfortable with that language, isn't a monumental encounter that changes our life forever. It grows over time. It's the accumulation of our experiences and our responses to them. Sometimes we find it in the confluence of several seemingly unconnected events that, when pieced together in the quiet of the night, open up a pathway to us. We may at first call them coincidences but, if we're attentive enough to discover the connections, we begin to see what some call "synchronicities."

Gregg Levoy, the author of the book *Callings*, writes:

When you're on the right path, the universe winks and nods at you from time to time, to let you know. Once you start noticing these synchronicities, these little cosmic cairns, once you understand that you're on a path at all, you'll begin to see them everywhere.

It's a lot harder to answer our angels when they don't appear before us the way Gabriel did to Mary, when they appear as subtle hints, persistent intuitions, dots that appear random and unconnected.

And that, of course, is only the beginning. Noticing the signs pointing us in a direction isn't the same as embarking on the journey itself. Remember what I said was the real miracle of the Annunciation? That Mary said *yes*. Mary was able to let go of whatever plans or dreams she may have had, to step into the unknown and to cast her fate with the mystery that presented itself to her. Think of the courage that took. Gabriel as much as said to her, "You will be an outcast. Your family will disown you and your fiancé will desert you." You can be sure that Mary knew all this and more, for under Hebrew law of the time an unwed mother could be put to death. And Mary, although confused and fearful, and surely without fully understanding what her future held, said *yes*. Despite all of the risk and all of the doubt, she said "Here I am, the

servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

As mere mortals, groping in the dark for the "cosmic cairns" that Gregg Levoy talks about, hoping that meaning emerges out of our disparate experiences, it's not often possible to offer up an immediate, outright *yes* in response. While Mary was able to respond in the moment to God's call, for us it may take some time. Not to delay or defer the call, but to hear it more clearly. That is what a personal spiritual practice is all about. Creating time and space in our busy lives to hear and to heed, to connect the dots, to peek

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down the path and prepare ourselves to step onto it. We are not, most of us, firemen trained to run into burning buildings, plunging headlong into the unknown. Nor do we possess the youthful innocence of the trusting Mary. Getting to *yes* isn't automatic for us. And so we must carve out of our hectic days the time to reflect, to consider, to meditate, to pray—to find our way into hearts and minds open enough to say *yes* to the unexpected.

Whether we call them angels, or God, or coincidences or synchronicities, there is something calling us to achieve the fullness and the magnificence that we are all capable of becoming. We are all Marys, pregnant with possibility and potential. And, disguised though they may be, the world is full of Gabriels, heralding new beginnings, urging us in unexpected directions, and revealing unknown opportunities. If we but pay attention and notice them, even in the face of uncertainty, we can choose to respond with a faithful "yes." ■



Expect the Unexpected

BY REV. JANE
DWINELL, WRITER—
WITH HER PARTNER
SKY YARDLEY—OF
THE BLOG “ALZHEIMER’S CANYON”

Two months ago, Sky was having one of his recurring nocturnal fights against a bad thing, a monster of some sort. Except instead of attacking me, as he usually did, he attacked the air off the side of the bed, and fell out. Gashed his forehead on the bedside table, and needed five stitches. Then refused to sleep in that bed again.

We dragged the mattress onto the floor, took the bed apart and put it in the cellar, and I headed to the furniture store. I bought a new frame that sits closer to the floor and a king size mattress to replace our double. I posted the old bed on Craigslist, and sold it. Given that all of our bedding was for a double bed, I bought new sheets and made a new king-size quilt. I’m glad we had the money to do all this.

Expect the Unexpected.

Also about two months ago, Sky said he felt he could no longer read books—it was too much work keeping track of the sentences, and he often forgot what he had just read and had to go back to the beginning of the sentence to try again. Maybe a Kindle would help? Fewer words on a “page” and he could make the font

size whatever he wanted. We downloaded some books from the library. That was better than paper books, but still too hard.

He took an audio book out of the library. We hauled out our rarely-used sound system, and he gave it a try. That was better. With his headphones on, he could sit happily in his chair and “read.” I bought him a small, portable CD player so he could listen to books in other locations—in bed, on the porch, at another house.

Expect the Unexpected.

About a month ago, just as the weather was getting better, Sky started taking long bike rides again. Except he found himself having a hard time swinging his leg up over the seat to mount the bike. He found himself falling off his bike if he didn’t get a fast enough start. He became too scared to ride his bike anymore, even though he never was physically injured, just psychologically injured.

Today we talked about what to do. Did he want to try a recumbent bike? (Closer to the ground, mounted in a different way.) Did he want to try an adult tricycle? (Sturdy, for sure, but maybe too humiliating? After all, we’re in Vermont, not Florida.) Did he want to give up bike riding all together, and take up walking? No clear answers yet, we’re still thinking on it.

Expect the Unexpected.

A handful of times in the last month, Sky has walked away from a hot pan on the stove when he was preparing his lunch. Once the smoke detector went off. The other times I noticed, and sent him back to the stove. I am waiting, and watching, to see if it’s time for Sky to stop cooking for himself. I hate for that to happen, but I would also hate for the house to catch on fire. Good thing the cats know to skedaddle out the cat door when the smoke detector goes off....

Expect the Unexpected.

Because of Sky’s inability to read books anymore, I recently read aloud Bill McKibben’s new book, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*. We are both concerned with the climate change/climate chaos that is transforming our planet. We both are concerned that the human race may be heading for extinction, that it may be too late to bring this dire situation around. We thoroughly enjoyed the book, and have had many deep conversations about what may be ahead for the planet, for the human race, our beloved mountains and lakes, our family and friends, and how we want to live our lives given this situation. We already live in a net zero house, and try to keep our footprint as small as we can. And to that we add the philosophy to live each day to the fullest, and not waste time with things that are not important. And, above all...

Expect the Unexpected. ■



Unexpected

BY DONALD, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN TEXAS

I have five daughters. I wasn’t always in touch with them all—and one day out of the blue my youngest wrote to me. Her name is Elise. She’s 17. A father could be no prouder. I was able to give her the gift of introducing her to the UU fellowship near where she lives.

It’s not very often that you find—or something finds you—that’s in tune with your inner being. The UU church did exactly that—it was unexpected, yet I happened to be at the right place at the right time for the UU church to come to my attention.

If the letter from my youngest daughter was unexpected, more surprising still was the first sentence she wrote: “Dad, I’ve been waiting for this moment my entire life!” I will say the same thing about myself and UUism—such freedom, with limitless possibilities for spiritual searching and journeys—what could be more unexpected than that? ■



Expecting the Unexpected

BY SUE MAGIDSON,
AFFILIATED COMMU-

NITY MINISTER, UU CHURCH OF
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

*Joy and woe are woven fine,
Clothing for the soul divine:
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.*

*It is right it should be so:
We were made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Safely through the world we go.*

—William Blake

...And the wicked witch turned into a toad and the evil sorcerer was banished from the land. The royal couple celebrated their marriage and were blessed with peace and prosperity and many children and lived happily ever after.

How many of us grew up with stories that ended something like that? First there was challenge and danger and hard work and then riches and blessings and happiness. The wicked were punished and the good were rewarded.

And then we discovered that life doesn't necessarily work that way.

Twenty years ago, my life spun out of control. For some unknown reason, life started sending catastrophes my way, one after another. My life became a soap opera. Then it became too unbelievable for any self-respecting soap opera audience to swallow. I started to identify with Job. Then I started questioning whether Job had really had it that bad. Eventually I wanted to paint a warning message in huge letters on my wall: "Expect the Unexpected." While I knew that this is impossible—if I could expect something to happen, then it wouldn't be unexpected—the words captured how completely out of control my life felt. It seemed that the only thing I could do was to brace myself for the next crisis, to try to gather enough

strength to ride it out.

Thankfully, my life has calmed down a bit since then, but I've been realizing that there's more truth in that pithy saying than I realized when I wanted to paint those words on my wall. Because what got me through all the unexpected *bad* things was, in part, all the unexpected *good* things. I began to realize that expecting the unexpected didn't have to mean bracing for the unexpected catastrophes. It could also mean keeping my eye out for the unexpected gifts, the silver linings.

Now, I want to be clear that I'm not suggesting that the silver linings in any way negate the bad, that good and bad can cancel each other out. Silver linings don't make everything okay, but somehow they make good and bad less black and white, less absolute. A friend's father told me a story about a conversation he'd had with his rabbi. The rabbi said that some good comes out of everything. My friend's father was incensed. "What about the Holocaust?" he cried. "Surely you can't tell me that anything good could come out of something so monstrous." The rabbi paused and then responded. "Were it not for the Holocaust, your wife of forty years would never have emigrated to the United States to escape Austria and you never would have met her." It's not that this blessed meeting and marriage make the Holocaust any less horrific. That would be ridiculous. But, nonetheless, these two events are intertwined: out of an event that shadowed the twentieth century came at least one small blessing.

Expecting the unexpected is something we need to learn. It does not come easily. Most of us want life to follow the rules. We want the good to be rewarded and the bad to be punished. We want predictability and control. Sometimes we get to live with that illusion—we make plans and then we carry them out. The person who deserves it wins a prize. Hard work pays off. Good deeds are rewarded. And then there are the times when life appears to

make no sense at all, when the walls come tumbling down and suddenly everything we've taken for granted is up for grabs. What then? What happened to happily ever after? Buddhism may be correct that the only constant is change, but that's not always comforting when life seems to be coming apart at the seams. For me, one comfort is knowing that not all of the unexpected surprises will be bad. Sometimes, what first appears to be a calamity may turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

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An acquaintance told me a story of a dismal time in her life. Her marriage had fallen apart. She was facing serious health problems. The future of her job was uncertain. Just as it seemed that her life couldn't possibly get any worse, her car was totaled in a car accident. Cursing, she went to rent a car—yet another annoyance. How could she know that the man behind the rental car counter would turn out to be her future husband?

We do not have crystal balls. We cannot see into the future. What appears to be a curse may come with a blessing and what appears to be a blessing may come with a price. Meeting my late partner was clearly the best thing that ever happened to me. The five years we spent together were easily the best five years of my life. Watching him die was clearly the worst thing that has ever happened to me. Does the bad negate the good? Not on your life. Would I have traded the joy to be spared the pain? Not for a moment. Did I feel as though I was drowning in grief? Absolutely.

Sometimes it amazes me that the best thing that ever happened to me and the worst thing that ever happened to me were so intrinsically

linked. But life is like that sometimes. Events are not necessarily good *or* bad. Sometimes they're both at the same time. After my partner died, the Passover tradition of tasting the *charoset* and the *moror* on the same piece of matzoh—tasting the sweet mix of apples and honey and the bitter horseradish at the same time—made sense to me in a new way. Joy and sorrow *can* coexist.

A year of cancer treatment was not something I asked for, not something I would wish on anyone. Parts of it were pure hell. But at the same time it was such a rich year, so full of love and blessings and wonderful people and life lessons that I honestly don't know if I would give it back if I had the choice. My cancer year wasn't good *or* bad; it was good *and* bad, sometimes alternating, sometimes simultaneous. *Charoset* and *moror*.

Sandy Boucher, in her book *Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Her Life-Threatening Illness*, writes about spending time in a large county hospital after major surgery and feeling overwhelmed by the sights and sounds. Desperately craving stillness, she feels assaulted by the loud voices and banging doors, the constant stream of medical personnel, her roommate's many visitors and blaring television. Boucher's friends pull the curtain around her bed to give her some privacy and one of them starts humming Amazing Grace, very quietly, to calm her. Suddenly, her roommate's television set is turned off and she hears three women's voices join in the song. The strangers in the next curtain have become earthly angels. The song is more beautiful, more precious for the surrounding melee. Boucher writes, "I felt as if I were being rocked and held in nurturing arms. . . Always there was some ray of kindness or beauty available to me, if I could be there for it."

Shortly after this tsunami of calamities, I attended a week-long Art & Spirit retreat at a Quaker retreat center. During the opening activity we introduced ourselves by painting a crude image in primary colors on an altar cloth. As I sat there waiting my turn, I realized that I was feeling very peaceful—very happy and very sad at the same time. So I created a swirl of blue and yellow paint—yellow for happy and blue for sad, swirled together to show their coexistence. But I wasn't content with my crude representation. This was a theme that I'd lived with for several years—that joy and sorrow can co-exist. How could I convey this in color and form? This question seized my imagination and would not let go. And thus I began a weeklong personal journey with sketch pad and oil pastels that took me far away from the regularly scheduled program of the retreat.

I wanted to convey the intensity of brief moments of joy amidst deep pain, but that wasn't enough. Somehow I needed to bring to life the words of William Blake: *joy and woe are woven fine*. What would it look like to *weave* joy and woe? That was truly the question of my week and finally at the retreat's end, I knew the answer. My clothing for the soul divine became a literal weaving of paper strips—charcoal gray interlaced with a vivid rainbow of colors.



I'm not trying to diminish the tragedies, not trying to say that everything will be all right. The pain is real. Bad things do happen. But it helps me to think of life as a rich fabric of joys and sorrows, successes and failures, gifts and losses, so tightly woven that sometimes the two extremes co-exist. And, in times of woe, it helps me remember to look for the silken twine.

We eat *charoset* with *moror*.

Life is not a fairy tale in which we live happily ever after. There will be happiness and there will be sorrow and they may even come as a package deal.

"We were made for joy *and* woe; And when this we rightly know, Safely through the world we go." ■

When I Wake Up



BY GARY, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN NORTH
CAROLINA

When I wake up
I find myself in an environment
that's so different from the one
I once knew.
I find I've not merely traveled out of
society, but to a place no one
warned me about.
I collect my thoughts for a moment
while gazing from the
window of my cell.
The rain-slicked razor wire
in front of the housing unit is being
cleaned again by nature.
I never fail to be surprised by the
same landscape time and time
again. Just as I perceive this,
suddenly the texture of reality has
changed once more.
The transition from society has been
nonstop to this Satan's cave.
Here is where I dwell.
In a momentary lapse of reason. ■



As the CLF, like all of us, encounters unexpected successes and setbacks, it helps so much to be able to count on recurring monthly donations. Being able to count on you month in and month out allows us to both create a realistic budget and to have the resources to respond to unexpected opportunities or trials. Please consider making a recurring donation that will help carry the CLF through whatever may come. You can set up your recurring gift at clfuu.org or by contacting the office at 617-948-6150.

From Your Minister



BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

A few years ago, a group from CLF decided to take a trip to the Gulf Coast to help with some reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina. (More than a decade had passed, but parts of the city where poor people live were not then, and probably still are not restored.) Folks joined in from all over the country for this mission trip, facilitated for us by the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice in New Orleans. We had some large vans that we'd pile into and we'd go to sites to clean them up and prepare them for construction.

It turned out our trip was in the beginning of Mardi Gras season. We were there in February. We didn't know it was Mardi Gras season—it wasn't the week of Mardi Gras or anything—but it turns out that New Orleans begins to celebrate to some degree after Epiphany (Twelfth Night of Christmas). Which meant there were celebratory parades. So many parades. Parades on side streets, parades on main streets, parades everywhere. Parades of schoolchildren, parades of families, parades of everyone.

Parades Happen

So every time we attempted to drive from Point A to Point B, at least some of us would be stopped cold by a parade. At first, I looked at these as an obstacle—something coming between us and what we were there to do. By the fourth or the fifth time we were stopped by a parade, however, we'd park on the side of the road and cheer for the revelers. And we developed a slogan, our own bumper sticker (which

we didn't make): Parades Happen.

You know that other bumper sticker, which I see quite often, "S**t Happens." No one can argue with the truth of that, because we've all seen a variety of stuff happen in our lifetimes which could be relegated to a pile of s**t. Knowing that life is going to be hard and include difficulty is one of the things that parents are expected to somehow pass on to our kids, while simultaneously building their resilience to deal with it. I personally prefer the twist on this bumper sticker: "Compost Happens." We try to take the hard stuff and turn it into something that can help growth to happen, that can fertilize growth. That is a lot of what we do in life with our spiritual practices.

But parades happen, too. People make them who are present and want to be counted, who use costume and music and creativity and numbers to interrupt the sleepy commute of people on their way to accomplish Something Important. Parades Happen.

Now, I live in Minnesota, not Louisiana, and it is not a place where people are prone to unexpected parades. It is a land of introverts and rule-followers, conflict avoiders and passive aggressive niceness. This is my home and these are my people, but I think we could do with a few more parades. I don't know how many parades it would take for people in Minnesota to stop being annoyed and cheer for the revelers—maybe thousands. I have no hope this will ever happen. Instead, Minnesotans will dutifully get permits every year for a few large parades which are planned for months and attended by so many people that claustrophobia sets in.

We lower expectations and we quit looking for parades. That's our loss. Because in this time when no amount of effort in composting can keep up with the pile of negative events transpiring and turn them into fertilizer, parades are important. Reminding our-

selves and each other that joy still breaks through, creativity still transforms, coming together and feeling our collective mass still interrupts the dreary repetition of business as usual.

In this year of political resistance and terror for so many, I was completely stunned to find myself falling in love again. Nine years after separating from my ex, reconciled to the fact that I would be single for the rest of my life, I found someone who makes me really happy. Perhaps even more surprisingly, my ex found someone, too. My ex is so sick with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis that she only has short bursts of time when she can get out of bed and leave her apartment, yet in one of those tiny windows, she met someone in her apartment building and they are in love, bowing to the limitations in both of their bodies to spend time together when they are both able.



You just never know when love will find you, or a parade might come by, or someone might wake up and change their ways. It's good to remember that, even though you can never predict when it may or may not happen. We can try to protect ourselves from disappointment by expecting only negative things to happen, but that negative expectation does not in fact blur the pain when the expectation is fulfilled. Our hearts long for more.

Yet another option, of course, is to become the unexpected ourselves—to ask the people we know if they want to have a parade, to love someone when we don't know if they'll love us back, to burst into song or write poetry when we're heartbroken, to plant flowers where no one would expect them to grow. To get an invisible tattoo—Parades Happen—to remind us to keep our eyes open so we don't miss one, and to be sure to enjoy every minute of them if they do pass us by. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR,
MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN
LEARNING, CHURCH OF
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During a preaching class in seminary we were each assigned to read aloud to the class a brief passage from the Christmas story in the second chapter of Luke. I was delighted to be assigned the bit that says:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

My classmates, it turns out, were not expecting to hear this read as comedic material. But really? It's funny. Well, I think it's funny. I mean, here are these regular guys hanging out in a field, doing their job, which in that moment really involves doing not much of anything. And then out of nowhere a freak-in' angel appears. And tells them not to be afraid (*as if!*), and that they should go off and look for a baby. Not just a baby, *the* baby—the savior of human kind. Which you will know because it is wrapped—like every other baby you've ever seen—in cloths. That's helpful. But that's OK, because this baby is in a feeding trough, which is not, in fact, where you usually find a baby.

That's funny, right? I mean it's just all so absurd, so weird, so...unexpected. And to me, the power of the Christmas story is in exactly that quality of unexpectedness. I mean, the idea of a savior

was an old one even at the time. I imagine that the notion that eventually a person of power will sweep in and save us from all this mess is pretty deeply embedded in our psyches. What else is the whole massive genre of superheroes? Or, for that matter, the ancient myths of warriors who battle gods as well as humans? A savior is almost by definition an expected thing, a thing that you look toward with eager, if long-term, anticipation.

The unexpected is, almost by definition, uncomfortable.

But a savior who's a *baby*? In a *feed trough*? That's just...well...who would have thought of such a thing? Who would imagine a savior who had no worldly power, no wealth, no physical prowess, no army? A savior who said such inexplicable things as “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” and “love those who persecute you.” A savior who told stories so radically rooted in generosity and forgiveness and grace that his apostles—his inner circle, his protégés—generally had no idea what he was talking about. That's pretty darn unexpected.

I love that so much. We live in a morass of habits and assumptions and things that we know are true, without being able to explain *how* we know they're true. Things like “might equals right” and “more is better” and “humans are the pinnacle of evolution.” The things we “know” are the ocean of the expected that we swim in, and it's almost impossible to perceive anything outside of that ocean.

But every now and again the unexpected breaks through—maybe it takes a chorus of angels—and it's like there's a color that we weren't able to see before. (It turns out this is actually

a thing. The color blue never appears in ancient writings, and it seems that until relatively modern times people simply did not perceive the color blue. Who knew?) It takes a radical departure—something far outside the norm—to rearrange our view of the world. The earth revolves around the sun, and our sun is simply one star amongst many. Who knew? Biology and species are not something fixed and God-given, but rather fluid, flexible, ever-changing. Who knew? Gender is not a male/female binary, but rather an intricate variety of possibilities. Who knew?

The unexpected is, almost by definition, uncomfortable. No one likes having their world overturned. No one likes to find out that the stories underpinning their lives are fiction, not fact. Most of us will do everything in our power to resist. No wonder the angels said “Be not afraid.”

And yet, on the other side of that resistance there can be joy, even delight. Life is not just a bunch of individuals fighting for their own survival, but rather a rich, complex, multi-faceted web of relationships in which mutual aid is as significant as antagonistic struggle. Who *knew*? It is possible to create massive change through the use of active non-violence, through the

direct, concerted application of love. Who *knew*?

It is possible to have a religion that is centered in the direct, concerted application of love, rather than adherence to any particular creed. Who *knew*?

To me, the Christmas story is a call to live like those shepherds who, in spite of the sheer absurdity

of it all, allowed the unexpected to break through, and then made a commitment to following a star, just to see where it might lead them. Aren't you excited for the adventure? ■





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The Call

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

The call comes on a stunningly
ordinary telephone: the doctor
telling you the test is positive,
the agency saying that you have a child,
the lover who left so long ago
wanting to make amends.
Suddenly the earth tilts.
The path you thought to follow to the lake
heads sharply up the mountains.

The trail through the dense woods
comes around the bend into an open meadow.
Of course you weren't prepared.
Who knows how to dress
for such a journey? Listen.
Inside your ear there is a high,
insistent ringing. What do you
suppose might happen
if you should answer?

Lynn's book of poetry, Bread and Other Miracles, is available at lynnungar.com.



