
THE UNEXPECTED GOD

When her 14-year-old dog, Abbey, died, four-year-old Meredith asked her mother if she could write a letter to GOD so that when Abbey got to heaven, GOD would know who she was.

- These are the words she dictated to her mother:

Dear GOD,

Will YOU please take care of my dog? She died yesterday and is with YOU in heaven. I miss her very much. I'm happy that YOU let me have her as my dog even though she got sick. I hope YOU will play with her. She likes to swim and play with balls. I'm sending YOU a picture of her so when YOU see her YOU will know that she is my dog. I really miss her.

Love, Meredith.

- Her mother put the letter in the envelope with a picture of Abbey and Meredith and addressed it to: GOD, Heaven.

- Meredith put several stamps on the front because she said it would take lots of stamps to get the letter all the way to heaven.

- Then she put the letter in the box at the post office.

Several days later, there was a package wrapped in gold paper on the front porch of the house, addressed to Meredith in an unfamiliar hand.

- When Meredith opened it, inside was a book by Mr. Rogers called, When a Pet Dies.
- Taped to the inside cover of was the letter they had written to GOD in its opened envelope.
- On the opposite page was the picture of Abbey and Meredith and this note:
- *Dear Meredith,*

Abbey arrived safely in heaven. Having the picture was a big help and I recognized her right away. Abbey isn't sick anymore. Her spirit is here with ME just like it stays in your heart.

Abbey loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep your picture in so I'm sending it back to you in this little book for you to keep to have something to remember Abbey by.

Thank you for the beautiful letter and thank your mother for helping you write it and send it to ME. What a wonderful mother you have. I picked her especially for you. I send MY blessings every day remember that I love you very much. By the way, I'm easy to find. I am wherever there is love.

Love, GOD.

What do you do when something unexpected happens?

- Some people just go with the flow.
- Some get upset.
- Some complain.
- Some enjoy the surprise and try to get the most out of it.

What do you do when GOD does something unexpected?

- Maybe you have had that experience.
- More likely, I think you probably have, but just weren't aware of it.

Today's gospel reading is full of the unexpected and gives us the opportunity to think about the unexpected GOD, beginning with the unexpected MESSIAH.

Maybe that sounds odd, because, after all, the prophets had foretold the coming of the MESSIAH, so HE wasn't unexpected.

- Yet, how HE came, and who HE was, and the kind of MESSIAH HE became certainly was.
 - People expected the MESSIAH to be like King David, wise, powerful, victorious over enemies, humble before GOD.
 - Now that's a MESSIAH worth following.
- What they got, though, was a traveling preacher—not what they were expecting.
 - Certainly, HE demonstrated power through HIS miracles over disease, nature, and even death,
 - but HE didn't seem to be too concerned about the Roman enemy who occupied the land.

When HE road into Jerusalem, as we will hear next week, they saw HIM as a KING to be praised and followed.

- But, just a few short days later they crucified HIM.
- And after His death, His followers expected that to be the end of the story.
 - It turns out, quite unexpectedly, that this was just the beginning.

I wonder how many today find themselves bumping into the “unexpected” GOD.

- It seems there are many who have a sense that believing and following JESUS is going to take care of all the problems in life;
 - that JESUS the GOD will make life in this world smooth and easy and comfortable,
- Yet, the unexpected GOD says, “Don't worry about the stuff of this world. That's not where your focus should be.
 - “Living in this world is a wonderful opportunity to show your love for ME by loving others.”

Gods are supposed to save the people, right?

- It's just unexpected who this GOD comes to save.

That's partly why JESUS was crucified.

- His focus was not on being with the rich and the powerful and the important.
- HE was focused on the poor and the downtrodden and the least in the community—the sinners in the community—and this offended those who expected a different MESSIAH than who JESUS appeared to be.
 - But for people like Mary and lepers and the demon possessed, this unexpected MESSIAH offered them some things—hope, love, forgiveness—that they could find nowhere else.

We can also find the unexpected GOD in this gospel reading through unexpected actions.

- How unexpected that Mary would use such a costly amount of perfume to clean JESUS' feet.
- And even more unexpected that she would undo her hair to wipe His feet---unexpected and unheard of.
 - Women didn't let their hair down except around their husbands.
- And anointing was only done for men by men.
 - But this was how Mary chose to show her devotion to JESUS, and HE unexpectedly allowed her to.

I'm also sure no one expected JESUS to dampen the mood of this party by talking about His death

- “She bought this to use on the day of MY burial.”

Or to argue with one of His disciples at this party.

- “You claim to be more concerned about the poor, Judas, than about ME, but with your love of money, you will always have poor around you.”

GOD has always been the ONE of unexpected actions.

- Choosing Abraham and Sarah, a couple past child-bearing age, to be the parents of a great nation.
- Or saving that nation by causing a great sea to part.
- Or giving a rainbow as a sign of GOD's love for humankind.

Lately, I've been looking at GOD's unexpected actions in a new way.

- Because, as the Bible tells us, GOD is love, so I've become convinced that GOD likes to make love to us.
 - Therefore, when I notice something unexpected and it makes me smile or feel good, I'll pause and ask, "GOD, are YOU making love to me?"

Six years ago, I was on a retreat at St. Joseph's Retreat Center.

- Many of us notice when we came into the worship center each day that there was a balloon floating up on the ceiling.
 - This balloon was a yellow happy face balloon looking down on the worshipers, but many of us had a sense that this unexpected addition to the chapel was more than just a coincidence.
 - Every time I saw that balloon, I couldn't help but ask, "GOD, are YOU making love to me?"

Perhaps you might try this and see if you can't discover more of the many ways that GOD unexpectedly acts.

- Perhaps we might find that many of the things that may not seem quite as directly connected to GOD, are indeed the actions of the unexpected GOD.
 - Donated food that becomes a satisfying meal to someone who would otherwise go hungry.
 - Personal hygiene kits that tells folks who are struggling that GOD has not forgotten them.
 - A live-streamed broadcast of a church service that reaches people who are homebound or otherwise unable to get to worship may be the unexpected GOD telling them, "I love you."
 - An invitation to come with you for worship may open a door for someone who just needs to know that in spite of what their past may say, their heavenly FATHER still loves and welcomes them back home,
 - and that may be the unexpected gift that renews their relationship with GOD.

These are the kind of unexpected actions of our unexpected GOD, and often they are made through unexpected people.

GOD regularly loves to do the unexpected with, for, and through unexpected people.

- Moses wasn't expected to lead the Israelites to freedom.
- Miriam wasn't expected to be the prophetess who taught Israel to sing of GOD's victory over Egypt.
- A ruddy-faced shepherd boy, David, wasn't expected to be the greatest king in Israel's history.
- A young girl, Mary, wasn't expected to give birth to the SAVIOR.
- Mary of Bethany wasn't expected to perform a simple act of anointing feet that became a great act of devotion.

And we might do well to ask through whom the unexpected GOD act might next?

- Look at those sitting around you.
- GOD may be about to use each of us in a surprising way to show the love of GOD.
 - With a listening ear, an act of caring, a word that opposes injustice, or a gift to one less fortunate, GOD may unexpectedly act through each of these.
 - And when you return to your home, take a moment and look in the mirror, and ask if GOD has something unexpected planned for you.

We know that GOD is regularly about the business of surprising us with where GOD shows up, and how GOD acts, and through whom GOD works, and by what GOD accomplishes.

- Take time this week to intentionally look for traces of the unpredictable GOD in your world:
 - the ONE who shows up where we least expect GOD to be, and always for the good;
 - the ONE who also shows up in the ordinary and expected places of bread and wine to convey forgiveness of sins and renewal of mission.
- Take time this week to open your eyes to the surprising ways that GOD will use you to care for the people and the world GOD loves so much.
 - And then, when—not if, but when—when you see it, take a moment and look up and ask the unexpected GOD, “GOD, are YOU making love to me?”