Christmas Eve – 2:00
“Then the Unexpected Happens”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Luke 2:1-14

It started off all wrong – at least not the way it’s supposed to be. Mary realized she was pregnant while she was only betrothed to Joseph. Her baby would be born out of wedlock – in that culture a sin punishable by death. Joseph was told to stick with her even though he wanted to “dismiss her quietly.” He would have had a lot of explaining to do and figured getting rid of her would be the best option. It was a recipe for failure we might say. Despite the encouragement in dreams and angel visitations who can blame them for their reluctance to listen – to comply? Perhaps we might even shudder the thought – if they were our kids – “How would they ever make it?”

The whole thing gets worse. Just when they thought they had a good plan to keep a low profile – you know, if we just have this baby quietly perhaps no one will really notice – then the unexpected happens – in a surprise move, the government intervenes throwing a wrench into everything. It’s where Luke’s version of the story begins.

The Emperor puts out a decree that everyone must be registered. As far as we know this was the first registration done in years. And it was done not to determine party affiliations, or how many lived in single dwellings or apartments. No, this was done to keep the people in line. It was a control move on the part of the Emperor Augustus. And it was the first incidence of “The Government vs. God” that we have in the gospel.

You know the story well. Mary and Joseph traveled back to his home town of Bethlehem along with several thousand of their closest friends and there was a mad dash for lodging which was in short supply. Try as they might, the couldn’t get a room even though Mary was in labor. So much for trying to keep this all a secret. Finally, they happen upon a home where they can sleep with the animals. The baby is born whom Mary nurses, swaddles, and lays in the animals’ feeding trough. They pulled it off, or so they thought. No commotion whatsoever. You know, “The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” No one would ever know. I’m sure they went to sleep that night thinking the worst was over. Then the unexpected happens.

Angels visit shepherds in the field and sing them the glorious song of great joy. “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. You’ll find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a feeding trough.”

After initial fears, the shepherds realized how fortunate they were to receive this news – and a baby in a feeding trough – well, that was well within their understanding of reality. The angels were speaking their language. So they went – in a hurry – to see this Christmas miracle – to see the face of God – and like Mary and Joseph – their lives were changed forever.
It’s a story of constant surprise – as unexpected things keep happening despite best laid plans. Yet each unexpected twist and turn had God’s thumbprint of intention and desire for all the people all over it.

I suspect many of us know this story rather well. Oh, not the memorized version you may have been forced to recite or participate in your Sunday school Christmas Pageant. And, maybe not all the particulars of this story specifically, but we know, don’t we, how plans suddenly change from our expectations – sometimes delightfully – other times with disastrous consequences.

We’re just walking along, doing what we do, going to the market, attending a class, walking along the beach, attending a dinner party – when suddenly “the unexpected happens.” The love of our life enters the room – introduces himself – and we know we will spend the rest of our lives together.

Or we were pursuing a certain career, doing what we know we were supposed to do but not necessarily what we want to do, then “the unexpected happens.” We know we’ve gotta make a change and doing so makes all the difference in the world.

Or we’ve worked at the same job for 45 years. In three months we are preparing to retire but “then the unexpected happens.” We feel a lump, or notice a strange spot on our skin, or suddenly feel like we have no energy.

Or like Mary, an unplanned pregnancy occurs. Or like Joseph, we want to run as fast as we can and avoid responsibility. The unexpected happens far more often than the planned it seems. And that just might be the way God gets our attention.

We may not realize it at first. Neither did Mary or Joseph. Heck, they were visited by angels, saw visions in dreams, had shepherds came to greet them bearing wonderful news. Even a star hovered over the place where Jesus lay. What more did they need?

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves the same question? What more do we need? Or deeper still, can we see the presence of God even when the unexpected happens?

That’s what I invite you to ponder on this Christmas Eve. There have been many surprises in our lives of late – in our government and in the life of our church. I’m sure you could probably recite a few of your own. It may be too soon to ask or to see, but I promise you God is in the unexpected just as much as God is in our best laid plans.

Life can be confusing, disappointing, surprising, challenging, rewarding. It can go on for years just as planned, but then “the unexpected happens,” and that will make all the difference, because it is then, there that we realize the most profound truth of this day – this night. Emanuel, God is with us!

Thanks be to God.