



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Expect the Unexpected

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 5, 2021

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Let us pray.

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;

from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art:

dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Amen.

I hope you'll forgive me for beginning this sermon with words from a hymn appointed for Advent. It's very unseasonable of me, I know. But those words have been swirling in my mind all week, because in this morning's Gospel reading, in the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, it feels like we're meeting a very unexpected Jesus, a Jesus that seems to be harsh and unkind. Not the Jesus we've come to expect, but a Jesus that it may be good for us to get to know.

Sometimes, the messages we need to hear come from the most unexpected places and the most improbable people. It's happened to me more times than I can count, when people I thought were the most unlikely sources of wisdom, told me just the thing I needed to hear.

I remember one time—it was many years ago now—I was kind of stuck on the road of my spiritual journey. I had been praying for a deeper knowledge of Jesus, not just the superficial, Sunday School understanding of him I had. So I did something that may sound kind of crazy. I asked God to "introduce" me to Jesus. And then I waited. One morning, as I was on the subway platform on my way to work, I noticed a woman standing near me. She seemed a little "off," so I tried to steer clear of her as I boarded the train. But sure enough, she sat down right across from me. I got the feeling that she had me in her sights. Now, I liked to use those early morning subway rides as quiet reading time, so I opened my book and tried to ignore her, but she started bouncing and swaying in her seat, as if she was dancing to some internal rhythm. I kept my eyes on my book. Then, she pulled out a bag of very aromatic fried ... something... and started eating. That smell first thing in the morning—I'm telling you—it permeated the whole car. But I kept trying to ignore her. I was determined to have a nice quiet ride and read my book. Then, she started to sing! Well, that was too much. This woman seemed intent on doing everything she could to disturb my quiet ride, assaulting my senses in almost every way. So I gave up trying to read. I gave up on the quiet ride. I put away my book, closed my eyes, and listened. And then I heard the words that she was singing: "Jesus is Alive! Jesus is Alive!" And as she sang, she was overflowing with joy!

And, all of a sudden, it dawned on me ...Here was Jesus! The Jesus I had asked to be introduced to. This was definitely not the Jesus I was expecting. This was not the Jesus I had been reading about in books. This Jesus was noisy, disruptive and full of life, and she kept nudging me and prodding me until she had my attention. This Jesus opened my heart more than I could have asked, and I laughed to myself at my

own limited imagination. As I got off the train, I smiled at the woman. She smiled back at me and said, "Hello, beautiful!" A beautiful message from a most unexpected person.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is traveling to unexpected places and meeting unexpected people. He's gone to the region of Tyre. It's Gentile territory, and Mark tells us he didn't want anyone to know he was there. So what was he doing there? We don't know for sure, but he had been traveling all over Galilee teaching and healing the sick and wherever he went, he couldn't escape the crowds. Now he's in a place where he might have expected to be left alone, a place where maybe he could take a little respite. A place where he might recover from the physical and mental exhaustion of his Galilean ministry. Yet even this far afield, as Mark records, "he could not escape notice."

A Gentile woman shows up, who immediately upon his arrival somehow has gotten word of him—this rabbi who can heal the sick. She comes to Jesus begging him to heal her sick little girl. But Jesus responds to her in a way that is shocking, even offensive. Not only does he reject her, he insults her by calling her a dog. But this woman won't take no for an answer. She responds to Jesus' insult with wit and wisdom and a deep knowing that other people—even Jesus' disciples—seem to lack. Jesus recognizes the power and wisdom of her response and heals her daughter.

Was this whole interaction a test of this woman's faith? Or did the woman's courage and persistence teach Jesus something that caused him to change his mind about her? Maybe, in this very unlikely encounter between a Gentile woman from Tyre and a Jewish rabbi from Galilee, both of them were tested and both of them were changed.

There was a long history of both animosity and interrelationship between the wealthy, coastal trading center of Tyre and the poor, inland agricultural region of Galilee, where Jesus was from. One of the sources of Tyre's wealth was the production of a precious purple dye—known as Tyrian purple—that was made from the secretions of small sea snails. Producing this dye required intense manual labor to harvest the snails and extract the dye. It is said that it took eight thousand of these snails to make one gram of dye.ⁱ The low-level workers in the Roman workshops were often exploited and subject to state control under the Roman Empire. Their hands were probably stained purple from the work. The economy of Tyre depended on this purple dye, and despite its labor intensiveness, it was a highly lucrative business. And, of course, purple was also the color of royalty, the color worn by the emperor himself.

For all its wealth, though, Tyre depended on the rich agricultural produce of Galilee for its food. It may be, as one commentator has suggested, that during periods of shortage, the Jewish peasant farmers—that is, the people actually producing the food—resented having to send their goods to the cities while they went hungry at home. If so, Jesus' rejection of the woman with the saying, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" takes on an additional layer of meaning.

The regions of Tyre and Galilee were historically interconnected by commerce, but they also struggled with territorial conflict, inequity, and exploitation. It was Tyre that the prophet Isaiah had prophesied against for its pride and greed and hoarding of riches, a prophesy that Jesus certainly knew. Jesus would also have been concerned about the exploitation of the workers who made the precious purple dye for the emperor's clothes and the unfair trade practices that benefitted wealthy patrons at the expense of the poor farmers. On this Labor Day Weekend, we can be mindful of similar inequities in our own time, and be grateful for the labor that provides our food and clothing and sustains our lives.

The meeting of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman was not just an unfriendly encounter between two people of different cultures and religions. It carried with it the burden of a long, adversarial history. Maybe that history of struggle was on Jesus' mind when he first met this woman. Maybe that's all he could see in

her at first. She was probably the last person on earth he would have expected to understand him. Did that blind him to the reality of her despair?

And what about the woman? She must have been desperate if she came to him for help. But, of course, she *was* desperate. Her little girl was very sick. And like any parent who is desperate to save her child from sickness, this woman's desperation drove her to extreme action—to seek help from this most unlikely healer, a poor rabbi from the hinterlands. She proves to be a skilled verbal sparring partner for him. When he tells her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," she doesn't shy away but cleverly responds with a saying of her own that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And more importantly, she seems to intuitively understand what Jesus is really talking about here. She knows he's offering her and her daughter the fullness of life.

When I hear this story today, I can't help but think of the mothers and fathers with little children who are risking everything, leaving their homes, trekking miles through dangerous, dense jungles, piling into unsafe, rickety rafts, passing infants over walls and into the hands of strangers, crossing foreign borders to save their children from war, poverty, disease, and violence. It is in these times and places where the courage of the Syro-Phoenician woman that called forth the infinite compassion and mercy of Jesus calls us to the same compassion and mercy. Let our differences of language, culture, religion, and history not blind us to the reality of their despair.

In his unexpected encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus was operating where he often did—in the borderlands, out on the edges of society. In fact, you might say that's where he did some of his best work, in those places on the margins where boundaries break down and barriers collapse. Those boundaries were broken down in this case by the words of a most unlikely supplicant, by her love for her daughter, and by her certain knowledge that Jesus was the one who could help.

It's in the borderlands of our own day that the presence of Jesus is needed most, in those places where we encounter people who are different from ourselves, people who don't look like us, or talk like us, or think like us, because that's where the healing begins. And it's sometimes in those most unexpected of encounters, like that woman I met on the subway that morning, that we can hear the message we've been waiting for and see the grace of God breaking through.

May we open our eyes to the blessing of unlikely people. May we open our ears to the gift of the unanticipated word. May we open our hearts to the unexpected Jesus, born to set people free.

Amen.

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ⁱ Sarah E. Bond, "The Hidden Labor Behind the Luxurious Colors of Purple and Indigo," Hyperallergic.com, Oct. 25, 2017
(<https://hyperallergic.com/406979/the-hidden-labor-behind-the-luxurious-colors-of-purple-and-indigo/>)