

**+ Micah 5:2-5a + Celebrate Christ Our Unexpected Savior!¹ +
+ The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day + 25 December 2015 +**

He was the most powerful man in history. He issued a simple order, and across the Western world, millions upon millions of people began to move because the great man, Caesar, wanted to tax them. So at his word, untold throngs of people began the journey to register in their hometowns.

With power like that, you might think that Caesar was born to it, but you'd be wrong. This great man was actually the last person you'd expect to bear the name Caesar. He was born as Gaius Octavius, a distant relative of Julius Caesar, but a nobody in Rome's circles of power. He was a minor official at best. No one expected him to become "The Great One."

On the Ides of March (March 15), 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated—stabbed and killed on the floor of the Roman Senate. As shocking as that was, the real bombshell was found in his last will and testament. In his will, Julius Caesar adopted Octavius as his son and heir and declared his new name to be Caesar. Jaws dropped all over the Roman Empire.

No one expected Gaius Octavius to receive such a gift. Yet when Julius Caesar adopted him and put his name on him, suddenly this young man was gifted with power and wealth beyond imagination. In fact, he was set on a path to be a ruler they would one day call Augustus—which means "The Great One." Yet that path was unexpected, undeserved.

Now as great as Augustus was—one of the most powerful men in history up to that point, he was actually not the most powerful man in the world at that time. One far greater than him was on the scene—someone even more powerful, even more august was about to arrive.

You see, the Son of God had come to earth, because God had a plan to change the world. Centuries before, the Lord had laid out that plan through various promises and prophecies. For example, about 700 years before Christ's birth, the Lord prophesied through Micah, ***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth."*** The King of Kings was coming, but God's plan to change the world wasn't what we'd expect for such a great ruler to come.

Among those millions of people on the move because of Caesar's decree, was a young woman, a virgin, who was carrying a child—a child more powerful than any emperor, a child like this world had never seen. You would expect them to be accompanied by Rome's finest soldiers. Yet that child was in the womb of a teenage girl making a 90-mile trek on the back of a donkey accompanied by her husband Joseph during her third trimester.

You would expect that child's family to be surrounded by gold and glory and empire. Yet even though they came from the family line of ancient King David, they couldn't have been farther away from royalty and glory and wealth. They were a poor couple making a cross-country trip to pay taxes.

The child was about to be born and you'd expect them to travel to a great city like Rome or Jerusalem. Instead they traveled to a punkin' junction called Bethlehem Ephrathah. Yes, Bethlehem was not far from Jerusalem, but it might as well have been the middle of nowhere. This ruler would not come from a city like Syracuse, but from little Bethlehem that was more like Tully, probably fewer than 1,000 people in Jesus' day. It wasn't a bustling metropolis or center of anything, but God in his grace made it important.

"But you Bethlehem Ephrathah...out of you will come one who will be ruler." Who can predict where the President elected in 2716 will be born—let alone if we'll still be electing presidents? Yet God's prophet Micah through the Holy Spirit foretold it. There were two Bethlehems in the land of Israel. This Bethlehem had produced an unexpected king before—King David, who was the youngest and unlikeliest of his brothers to become king. Bethlehem would produce another ruler, a king who would come from an unexpected place to bring unexpected peace.

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon received with thanks from Rev. Jonathan Schroeder.

For such a special child, you'd expect him to have the finest medical facilities, the best prenatal care, and the softest bed. Yet when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, there wasn't a guest room to be found. Even though the labor had started there was no place for them to stay. The Son of God would enter our world homeless, in a room meant for livestock. As Mary lay down to give birth, Joseph had to shoo away animals and clean up the straw. The Son of God wasn't born in a royal hospital surrounded by doctors and nurses, but among the smell of manure and the braying of a donkey.

No one expected this to be God's plan to bring the Savior into our world, but Mary **"gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."** (Luke 2:7) When the Son of God was born to Mary, he had neither bassinette nor onesie. The Son of God had a feeding trough covered in cow slobber and leftover straw. You wouldn't put your baby there, but God did. You see, God did the unexpected because you and I fail to do what he expects.

One of the reasons that the Son of God was born in unexpected humility is that God expects better from me than what I give him. Have you ever thought about that? What does God expect from you and what do you actually give him? God expects us to live holy lives—lives without sin, without failure, without falling. He expects you to serve him willingly and joyfully, always putting him first in your life and everything else second.

Yet what does he get from you? We tend to want everybody to think we're pretty good people. We want them to think we're moral or joyful or good, but when it's just you and the mirror...when it's just you and your heart...you can't escape the certainty of it: You don't give God what he expects from you. You don't live the life he expects you to live. He asks for perfect, and what do you bring? Brokenness. Emptiness. A selfish, materialistic heart.

Yet Jesus didn't come to teach you how to be a good person. He didn't come to coach you to a better way of living. He didn't enter this world to give you seven steps to a fruitful life. No, he came with unexpected humility to give us what we could never deserve. He came to give us grace and peace.

Micah foretold this when he wrote, **"Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites...and he will be their peace."** The prophet Isaiah gave a similar prophecy. **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us")."** (7:14) That special Child born of a virgin mother at just the right time would restore the Lord's kingdom of grace for sinners like us and restore peace between God and us.

Jesus needed to be born in unexpected humility, because he needed to die. He didn't come to show you how to live, but to live in your place and die in your stead. He didn't come to coach you to more holy living. He came to redeem you from your sins and purchase righteousness for you with his own blood.

That's why God became human at Christmas. That baby in the manger wasn't just the Prince of Peace. He was the Price of Peace. He was the payment needed to settle your debts, to cancel your guilt, to win your forgiveness. On the cross Jesus gave us peace. With Jesus on the cross, God gets everything he expects and gives us everything we don't.

That's what makes Christ Jesus our unexpected Savior. He's a king who endured the shame of a criminal's death on a cross to bring you peace with your heavenly Father. Now you have peace for your guilty conscience. You have peace in this vale of tears and peace in the hour of death. Peace through Jesus gives you certainty when you're faced with tragedy and hardship, difficulty and trial and woe. That peace even shows itself in how you interact with loved ones and co-workers and neighbors and friends and classmates. It's no wonder the angels sang that first Christmas night, **"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all on whom his favor rests."** (Luke 2:14) That heavenly peace came to earth through Jesus—the embodiment of God's love, the fulfillment of his promises, the unexpected Savior sent by God himself for you and me. That unexpected gift of peace is yours, ours!

Gaius Octavius took the unexpected gift of the name Caesar and went on to do amazing things. He became the first Roman emperor. He changed the city and the country. He even changed history. The work of Augustus led to the longest period of peace, unity, and prosperity for Western Europe in recorded history. His dying words summed up his life. **"I found Rome made of clay. I left it made of marble."** It was an empire that lasted for 1,500 years, but today, you can go to Rome and see how that marble has crumbled and fallen and how all the glory of Rome has passed away.

But there is a greater King, a greater gift, a greater kingdom, a greater glory! There is news so unexpected that it changes your world, your family, your future. It has rewritten humanity's history and its destiny. It calls you out of darkness into the light of God's love. It makes you adopted children of our heavenly Father. It gives you the rights of sons, an inheritance that will neither fade nor fall nor pass away. It gives you lasting, heavenly peace. ***"I bring you good news of great joy that is for all people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."*** (Luke 2:10-11) Amen.