

AN ENCOURAGING WORD FOR TROUBLING TIMES #141 (by Rev. Dr. Alice Wolfe, 12/24/20)

“The Gift in the Unexpected”

This year has not turned out how anyone expected. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed or ruined many plans for many things, including family and holiday gatherings. Many of us are sad that we can't be with our family and friends for Christmas. We have good reason to be sad, but we have a better reason to be glad: Even though we can't be with our family, God is with us! This is what we celebrate at Christmas—that God comes to be with us—in all of life (good, bad, unexpected, and otherwise).

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him ‘Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us).” (Matthew 1:23, NIV)

Despite the disappointments and despair the pandemic has caused, God loves us and is with us. Despite all the unexpected and often disappointing change of events,

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28, NRSV)

God seems to specialize in doing great things in the unexpected! God's plan for the birth of his son unexpectedly and totally changed Mary's and Joseph's plans, but they discovered the gift and blessing of following God's will. God unexpectedly worked through an ungodly king to fulfill the 400-year-old prophecy that the Messiah would be born Bethlehem. Traveling to Bethlehem to register for the census likely helped Mary and Joseph get away from the judgmental glances and comments regarding the suspicious nature of Mary's pregnancy. Not finding a place to stay was a blessing for Mary and Joseph; instead of being crammed in a noisy room with many other people they didn't know, they had privacy and quiet in the stable for the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph probably missed their families, but they learned that God, their loving Heavenly Father, was always with them—and He is enough. The unexpected announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds (who were considered dirty, smelly, scoundrels who couldn't be trusted) proves that God comes to be with all of us, regardless of what others think of us. Most people missed Jesus, the Messiah, because he wasn't anything like what they expected.

After completing his earthly ministry, Jesus unexpectedly sacrificed his life on the cross for the sins of all people—so they could be forgiven of their sins and restored in their relationship with God. And then, even more unexpectedly, Jesus came back to life three days later—conquering sin and death—so he can raise us to new and everlasting life in him!

Truly, nothing is impossible with God! God can bring good out of all things for those who love and follow him, and God is always with us. His presence is such a gift in the unexpected and in all of life—and that's good news for all of us to share! The pandemic may have messed up our Christmas plans, but it hasn't messed up God's plans. God is much bigger than our challenges and still in control and still with us. God can and will bring good out of everything if we seek and follow him. Let us not fret about our messed-up Christmas plans, but instead look for ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ—the best news in all the world. Let us receive the gift of Jesus and find tangible ways to show and share his love with others!