

This mornings readings speak of expectation and preparation. Expectation and Preparation. The two go hand in hand when you think about it. When you expect something, typically you prepare for it. But despite our expectations and preparations, whether it's plans for a vacation or receiving guests at holiday time, both can stray from our expectations.

For example, a few years ago I planned a trip to Oregon to visit several of their outstanding wineries and wines. Since I love to prepare, I did a lot of research, sought advice from fellow wine-lovers who had been there before, and thus made some great preparations for a trip of a lifetime. And it was a great trip. However, despite all of my preparation, much did not go according to plan.

One morning I set out to visit my list of carefully researched wineries. Even though I had my trusty GPS (which is a kind adjective) I missed a turn and was forced to go to next redlight and make a u-turn. No big deal, right? Wrong! No sooner than I had made my u-turn, than the local police had pulled in behind me with his lights on. So I pulled over wondering what I had done. Well, the kind officer informed me that in Oregon (unless otherwise noted) all u-turns were illegal. I told the officer I was from out of state and was not aware of that particular law. He let me go, thankfully, but just a few minutes later I was in for another surprise.

Since I was low on gas, I pulled into a gas station to fill up my car. No sooner than I had got out of my car and reached for the pump, an attendant approached looking at me as if I was from Mars. Turns out, in Oregon you are not allowed to pump your own gas; an attendant has to do it. Lesson number two.

So, despite all of my expectation and preparation, I was still caught off-guard. I was focused on the fruits of the vine. I had overlooked and did not prepare for the things that would get me there without trouble. Life is like that. Despite our best plans and expectations, inevitably something crops up to get in the way of how we had expected things to go.

Salvation history is no different. The Jews expected that as God's chosen people, God would shield and protect them from harm and destruction. But this did not happen. In our first reading from Baruch, the Jews are in exile from the promised land. They had been conquered and shipped off in captivity to Babylon, which is now current day Iraq. Talk about a drastic change in plans. However, in the midst of this God sends his prophet Baruch to assure them that things will not be this way forever.

And indeed they weren't. Yet the Jews return to Jerusalem, did not come at the hands of one of their own; as they might have expected. No, their return to their home came at the hands of a pagan, Darius the Persian, who allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

This gets at the heart of Advent. In Advent we prepare for and await the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ born as an infant to the veritable nobodies Mary and Joseph. The Jews had been expecting and awaiting for the coming of the Messiah for hundreds of years. But when he did arrive, no one (or should I say, no Jew) was prepared for or expecting the Messiah to come in the child Jesus. Only a few outsiders (shepherds and pagan astrologers) caught on to that something so miraculous, as the baby Jesus, was the pivotal point in all of human history.

The point is, even though the Jews were expecting and perhaps planning for the Messiah; they missed his coming and arrival completely. Some two thousand years later, we know the Messiah is coming to us in the gift of Christmas. While we make our plans for the celebration of his arrival and birth; the question remains: what else are we missing? Our Savior visits us everyday in the faces of our neighbor, in the homeless and destitute, in those who struggle to make ends meet and struggle to provide a Christmas for their family. We have veterans who suffer from the horrors of war and can find little joy in the trappings of the holiday season.

Despite our planning and expectations for the Christmas holidays and the birth of our Savior, we still miss a lot. Advent is our time of preparation. Let us make good use of it by trying look beyond our *personal* expectations, and prepare to see and respond to Jesus in the places and people we least expect.