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This past year was not what I expected, and so far, 2021 is beginning in a way that I never expected either. I never expected a pandemic to interrupt our lives, making us all scramble to figure out how to do things differently, such as our two churches' ability to livestream or broadcast on AM radio. I never expected to reclaim the older technology of sending notes and making phone calls since I could no longer meet in person with many of you. And when I got the virus, I didn't see that coming.

Beyond our own community, as we elected a new President, I didn't expect to see the uprising and violence at the Capitol, for our nation prides itself on the smooth transition from one President to another. I never expected to witness two impeachment proceedings for the same President, something that has never occurred in our history.

When unexpected situations arise, when we don't see things coming, we may find ourselves feeling unbalanced, out of kilter, disoriented. We like things to go the way they normally do, and when something

upsets the process, we may not know how to respond.

I think the crowd that welcomed Jesus back to his home synagogue may have experienced a similar phenomenon, for when he read from the scroll one Sabbath during worship, the congregation reacted in an unexpected way. The first time we read this story, we may mutter to ourselves, "I didn't see that coming."

As Luke writes in his Gospel, Jesus came to the town where he had been raised and went to the place of worship on the Sabbath "as was his custom." In other words, Jesus often worshiped in the synagogue, gathering to celebrate God's presence, similar to the way we gather in church for worship. Prayers. Songs. Scripture. We may be meeting in a different way now, but we still have the regular practice of worshiping God, whether virtually alone or gathered with others. The process may appear different, but thousands of years ago and today we still worship to give thanks for God's presence in our lives.

When it came time for someone to read the scripture for that day, someone must have suggested

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that their hometown Jesus be the liturgist. “Hey Jesus, how would you like to read the scripture text for today? Today’s reading is from the prophet Isaiah. We would really appreciate it if you would read it.”

“Sure. I’d be glad to read from Isaiah.”

And so, he began to read about being chosen to bring good news to the poor and the prisoners, bringing sight to the blind, and liberating the oppressed.

I imagine the people nodding their heads, maybe a few Amens, for it all sounded so wonderful. Afterwards he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the worship leader, and sat down. I imagine the people saying among themselves, “What a wonderful boy Mary and Joseph raised. It’s so good he could come back and read scripture to us.”

But then he said something they didn’t see coming, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

Those gathered must have thought he was talking about someone else, for they remained filled with awe at his speaking. But before his words could sink

in a bit deeper, Jesus reminded them of another story from their scriptures: the time the great prophet Elijah helped an outsider during a famine rather than going to his own people. Then Jesus pushed even more as he told another story about the time when many people had skin diseases, for the prophet Elisha once again helped only an outsider, not his own people.

I imagine the crowd felt a bit marginalized, finally putting together the words from Isaiah with these two stories. “What did he say? Jesus sees himself as the one to help the poor and oppressed? Why would he mention the stories of the outsiders getting help? Does that mean we’re not included in what he’s doing? I didn’t see that coming.”

That’s when a mob formed and plotted to throw him over a cliff, though somehow Jesus managed to escape their violent plot.

This story seems unnervingly similar to what happened in the Capitol this month. A group of people who felt they were marginalized and left out and wanted to be noticed. For example, Kevin Haag, a retired landscaper from North Carolina, said he felt

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empowered as he joined with all the other protestors. It felt good to show that, as he said, “We are here. See us! Notice us! Pay attention!”

Later, when the President told everyone to go home peacefully, Mr. Haag said, “We are representing the 74 million people who got disenfranchised. We are still out here. We are a force to be reckoned with. We are not going away.”¹

The mob that wanted to throw Jesus over a cliff 2000 years ago is not what I expected to read about as Jesus began his ministry, nor did I expect to watch a mob of people violently attack our Capitol this month. Even though we may not have seen it coming, I think most of us can identify with the feelings of being left out at one time or another.

In the school cafeteria, students worry about not having anyone to eat with, of being left out of a social group. Single adults worry about being left out of invitations that often seem to focus on couples. Those who are introverts and find starting conversations difficult in a crowd may feel left out as everyone around them seems engaged in

discussions. Those with different racial or ethnic backgrounds may get left out of invitations. Those who are gay or transgender may feel left out when their families don’t accept their sexual orientations.

Being left out is something I imagine each one of us has experienced, but that doesn’t give any of us permission to resort to violence to get noticed. I suggest instead that we strive to regularly notice one another, to hear each other’s story, even if it’s not what we expected to hear. No matter what painful experiences we encounter, God continues to welcome us into God’s family.

I think that’s what Jesus was trying to tell those from his hometown—that he saw his ministry echoing the words of Isaiah to welcome everyone into God’s realm. Not just those from his hometown. Not just those who worshiped with them. Not just those who believed or looked like them. But to welcome those normally ignored. As our former General Minister and President Sharon Watkins reminded us several years ago, God welcomes all, and “all means all.”

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This coming Monday as we celebrate the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., may we remember his words:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All...are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.²

Whatever happens this week, and even if we mutter, “Didn’t see that coming,” know that God remains with us, striving to bring new possibilities for our lives.

¹ Dan Barry, Mike McIntire and Matthew Rosenberg, “Our President Wants Us Here’: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol,” Jan. 9, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html.

² www.discipleschristian.org/all-means-all