

United Church of Northfield  
July 11, 2010  
Exodus 3: 1-15

Expect the Unexpected  
Rev. Roger Brown

### Introductory Remarks

As you know, this Wednesday, I move from Northfield back to Brattleboro. For the past 5 months, I have been on the interim journey with you and the rest of the congregation as we move together through the interim time. I want to reflect a bit on this nature of the journey yet to begin, rather than look too much back on this journey we have had together. Yes, some of this journey will be affirmed liturgically this morning. I am moving into a new chapter in my life and ministry, and so are you the congregation. What will scripture teach us to keep in mind as we move forward? While I'm happy to learn from the past, I'm always eager to embrace the future. I think the story of Moses which we re-visit this morning has something to teach us. Let me explain the sermon title right at the beginning.

### Journey/Expect the Unexpected Themes

When we begin a new journey, we enter into a new set of relationships. In 1971, I began a journey that involved entering a new family and a new community. I went on an exchange program with the Experiment in International Living to Germany. This trip was part of a homestay program with families in small towns in northern Germany. I mention this story because, during orientation at the Experiment campus in Brattleboro, we learned the motto for this program: The motto was "Expect the Unexpected." Not surprisingly, I'd like this to become your motto as you move forward.

#### "Expect the Unexpected!"

When I went to Germany and became part of the Cassing family in the town of Rodinghausen Westkilver, I expected that my closest relationship might have been with one of my two German brothers; however, I was surprised to discover that my closest relationship developed with my German father.

Painted on the main building of the Putney campus of the Experiment in International Living, was a mural that said, "People learn to live together, by living together." College students who move from home to the communal living environment of the college dorm, certainly experience this motto – they learn to live together by living together! We here in this faith community have a similar learning experience, though we don't live with each other on a day to day basis. With my adult group from the Experiment in International Living, I really did go off into another country that spoke another language. In order to cope with this big change in environment and life experience, I certainly needed to "expect the unexpected."

### Moses His Calling

We have before us the wonderful story of Moses' call to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. This incredible story offers insight into the way God calls us to service and discipleship. It is also the prelude to the Exodus, the journey of a people, its leaders and God's direction into the future.

### Moses Discovers the Unexpected

Moses' encounter with God on the mountain is both unexpected and unimaginable! Moses is just minding his own business, being a common shepherd. He is just trying to live a quiet life of retirement, when he encounters a burning bush and a commanding voice! Certainly here is an "unexpected experience!" This scene doesn't

seem to bother Moses, but God's request certainly does. God says, "Moses, have I got a job for you!" Moses' response is typical of all of us. "no thank you!" "Leading disgruntled Israelites isn't my forte!" "I'm really quite content watching the sheep thank you!" God, however, doesn't give up, and Moses gives in.

#### Unexpected Happenings in the Bible

God is always doing the unexpected. Let's remember a few of the ways God has surprised his people in the Bible. Remember, God blessed Abraham and Sarah with children at a very old age. God made it happen that Moses would be raised in Pharaoh's household until it was time for him to lead his people out of slavery.. This was certainly not the upbringing that Moses' mother would have expected in her wildest dreams! In the New Testament, Jesus called some simple fishermen. Then he turned them into the first Christian missionaries and dedicated disciples. Again, many of these fishermen expected to spend their lives working on the lake! Later on God took the Christian-hunting Jew, Paul, and turned him into the Christian who became an early missionary to Asia Minor.

Then there is the most surprising, most amazing and most unexpected event of all God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

#### The Good Samaritan Story

In the Gospel story for this morning about the Good Samaritan, the unexpected takes place once again. The priest, whom we would expect to help the fallen traveler just goes on by and doesn't stop to help. The Levite, a person of a more higher class of Jews, does not stop either. The Samaritan might not be expected to stop either but he does the unexpected thing and helps out the injured man.

#### What to Do We Do When We Encounter the Unexpected?

What DO we do when God takes us by surprise and we encounter the unexpected? What do we do when God turns up in the last place imaginable? What do we do when we're minding your own business and God says, "Hey there! Here I am!" What do you do when God shows up, and you weren't even looking for him? All these things happened to Moses. I think that, if we could have an interview with Moses, he would suggest the following things to do when God shows up unexpectedly.

1. The first thing to do is to PAY ATTENTION. Remember, Moses saw the burning bush and began to check it out. Then God had to call him to attention. So, if God shows up in an unexpected way, check it out. So PAY ATTENTION TO GOD. Remember, God had to coax Elijah out of the cave on Mt. Horeb to pay attention to him. When I'm on Star Island in two weeks, I will try to follow thi advice myself.
2. The next thing to do is to RESPOND WITH REVERENCE. Remember the story – as Moses approached the burning bush, Moses said, "Moses, take of your sandals, for this is holy ground." Reverence here might mean, how do I honor or recognize this experience as a spiritual experience. What is God saying to me here?
3. The third thing to do when God shows up by surprise besides paying attention, and responding with reverence is to be OPEN MINDED. God may have a new direction for you, or a new assignment. Remember, Moses was just working as a simple shepherd, when God asked him to challenge Pharaoh and set his people free. At first he didn't want the job. And I don't blame him. So, PAY ATTENTION, BE SPIRITUAL, and BE OPEN-MINDED.
4. The fourth powerful insight the Moses story gives us is this. **Take time to go to the mountaintop.** That's where Moses went. .Elijah, the prophet, also went there. In

modern terms, I suggest finding time to go on a retreat. . A personal retreat is something I only began to do after 20 years in the ministry. Many of you know that I now go off to New Skete Monestary or to Silver Bay on Lake George.. I'd like to make a little ironic note here.. Sometimes, when we are the busiest, and need some perspective, then that is the best time to go on retreat. Some months ago, when I got very busy, a short personal retreat might have helped me gain new perspective on my ministry here in Northfield.

Let me remind you how I approach a personal retreat When I go on a personal retreat, I have always the same simple agenda of two questions: 1. How did I arrive at this point in my life? and 2. what does God want me to do with my life next? So, especially this Summer, be like Moses – go to the mountaintop and talk with God.

#### Near Conclusion – About Parenting

Just as has happened in the short time I have been here, God will send some new folk through the door of our historic sanctuary who come with new visions, their own needs and hopes and dreams, and as they become part of the church family, the direction of the ministry shifts toward the unexpected. This is not unlike another expect the unexpected experience of Mothers and Fathers who discover that boyfriends and girlfriends and close friends of their children change the direction of the family altogether in unexpected ways.

#### Conclusion

So I would encourage you as you enter a new chapter in the life of the United Church of Northfield to expect the unexpected. I encourage you to be open and patient as God, in his own time, does miraculous and unexpected things in this place. As you, parat of the United Church begin a new journey, expect the unexpected. It may well be that God will take you both – pastor and people down paths of ministry which neither of you ever expected. So expect the unexpected!

Now that the Summer season is well under way, I encourage you to be open to the presence of God in new ways. I encourage you to be open to new tasks and new opportunities for service to God with may come into your life in unexpected ways.

Let me now close with an anonymous poem entitled, “Life Responds to Your Outlook on Life.”

#### Poem – Life Responds to Your Outlook on Life

Life is largely a matter of expectation.  
 You must expect to succeed,  
 if you want to succeed.  
 When you expect things to happen,  
 strangely enough, they do happen.  
 Expectation energizes your goals  
 and give them momentum.  
 When you believe something good can happen, it will happen.  
 The dreams you believe in come to be.  
 Set your goals high.  
 If you begin with some wild expectations  
 you'll succeed beyond your wildest expectations.

May you continue to be a blessing in your ministry in Northfield and the world!  
 Amen!