



Waiting for Unexpected Appointments

James McAlister

A band of swarthy men prod their sleepy camels out of slumber to face another interminable, boiling desert day. As traders from the land of Midian, Egypt's bustling bazaars beckon. But unknown to them, they will keep an appointment they do not know they have. And it will fling them into the centrifuge of history that separates miraculous from mundane.

Appointments. Many I've had but never kept. Walter Allison (dentist) and Ed Hubach (barber) and numerous co-workers have felt the sting of inconvenience whenever appointments slipped through the cracks of my oversight.

Other appointments I've wished to skip but couldn't. Whenever prayer failed to bring divine deliverance, surgical appointments wrested personal preference from my hands. And I couldn't avoid the appointment when the boss explained my good fortune at being able to pursue exciting opportunities . . . elsewhere.

Though we know neither day nor hour, a saying embodies two mandatory appointments: "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment." My bodily presence is required, ready or not.

Certain appointments I'd like to have but don't. Example: meetings with eager editors twitching to launch my latest masterpiece into immortality.

But appointments we have but don't know we have—these are the unintended appointments that bristle with surprise and astonishment.

Consider the Midianite traders. Just another laborious day following smelly camels along the desert trade route. Or so they supposed . . . until the unexpected appointment intervened. Flagged down by a small knot of men bent on ridding themselves of their pesky 17-year-old brother, the traders seized the opportunity of sure profit in the Egyptian slave market.

A set of lucky breaks, some might say. A boy is cast by jealous brothers into a dry cistern to await death, and then they lift their eyes to behold the caravan that had embarked on its monotonous trek days before. They cut a deal, a windfall for both parties. Problem solved.

But the precise timing of this fortuitous meeting in the vast, uncharted expanse begs the question. What would have happened had the traders decided to sleep in or take the day off or shirk their responsibilities?

Neither the traders nor the brothers nor the boy himself could have known that this youthful slave-to-be had his own appointment to keep in Egypt. At age 30, Joseph would stand before pharaoh Sesostris II as Egypt's new prime minister. And everywhere he would go thereafter, his herald's warning cry of "bow the knee" would echo the power of unintended appointments.

Even today I harbor feelings of being boxed in by unwelcome (and to me, unfair) circumstances. But my ears eagerly incline toward the horizon which surely conceals the deliberate, steady, plodding footfalls of deliverance.

The caravan is on its way; I must not miss it. And I won't—as I continue with what I know to do until the appointed hour declares itself.

Unintended appointments are the linchpins binding ordinary days to extraordinary destinies.

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