

## Surprised by Christmas

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015]

### I

If we took a poll of the most boring places on earth,  
a significant number of votes would probably go to doctors' waiting rooms.

So it was while sitting in a boring doctor's waiting room that author Robert Fulghum was surprised to be reminded of Christmas.

It was a bleak February day and Fulghum had been under the weather for a while, so he had gone to the doctor.

As he sat in the waiting room, he noticed an attractive older couple who were also waiting.

The woman wore holly berries and poinsettia leaves in her hair.

The man leaned toward Fulghum, smiled, and said, "Merry Christmas!"

Fulghum replied in same before he realized what he was saying—  
it wasn't Christmas...it was February.

Then the man began singing Christmas carols.

The receptionist addressed the old man as Uncle Ed,  
wished him a Merry Christmas,  
and invited him to come on back for his appointment.

After the old man left, his wife explained her husband's strange behavior

He had a couple of strokes that resulted in changes of behavior.

But then one morning in March he quite unexpectedly came down the stairs announcing that he had forgotten it was Christmas.

He urged his wife to help him put up decorations and wrap gifts.

The bewildered woman called up their daughters, and the whole family got together and celebrated Christmas that day. It was actually a warm, enjoyable experience.

After the daughters left, the man asked his wife to tell him about his childhood Christmases. Perhaps it was merciful that he didn't remember his abusive childhood in a family that never celebrated Christmas.

His wife, who had never lied to him, loved him too much to tell him the truth. So she spun tales of wonderful holidays filled with love, family traditions, and memorable gifts. Her husband was pleased.

Now every few months, the woman explained, her husband would suddenly announce that it is Christmas, and the family will again gather to celebrate the occasion. The daughters think of these celebrations as Father's Day, their time to make dad happy.

No one ever knows when the Christmas conviction will strike, but they are ready and willing to participate whenever it does.

The woman remarked,

"It's kind of refreshing to have Christmas come as a surprise."

## II

**One thing we can say about Christmas: it does come as a surprise.**

There have been few events in history quite so surprising.

Mary and Joseph were certainly surprised.

The whole thing put a terrible strain on their relationship,  
as you can imagine.

It took the intervention of an angel first to Mary and then to Joseph to put their hearts at peace.

The birth of the Son of God is not something that happens every day to just anyone.

That this modest peasant couple from the tiny village of Nazareth should be chosen for such a momentous honor must be considered one of the great surprises of history.

After the long and arduous 80-mile journey from Nazareth to Joseph's family home of Bethlehem,  
there was the surprise of giving birth in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn.

Mary and Joseph were surprised,  
as were the shepherds out on the hillside.

In fact, the whole thing so unnerved them that they were terrified.

“Sore afraid” is how the King James Version puts it.

Shepherds in that time were on the fringes of society.

They were considered unclean, uncouth, outcasts from the rituals and traditions of the Jewish people.

What a surprise that the angelic announcement would be made to them,  
instead of to the religious leaders and prominent people of Jerusalem.

No wonder they were afraid—we would be too!

Have you ever wondered what happened later when the shepherds tried to tell their story of what they saw that night to their friends and families?

Did people look at them the way some of us do those people in Roswell, New Mexico who claim to have seen UFOs?

I can hear their friends and neighbors saying:

*You saw what? Angels? They did what? They sang?  
You've got to be kidding!*

The shepherds were surprised by Christmas.

And certainly King Herod was surprised.

The Wise Men came asking the location where the new king of the Jews was to be born.

Herod told them, "*Go find the child that is to be born king of the Jews that I may come and worship him, too.*"

Of course, we know better than that.

Herod was so threatened by the possibility of a usurper to his throne that he had a whole generation of baby boys wiped out.

Herod was surprised, and, even more importantly,  
the people of Israel were surprised.

The Messiah was to come;  
they were convinced of it,  
but not like this.

The Messiah was to come with power and might.

To be sure, Isaiah had written,

*"For unto us a child is born,  
unto us a son is given,  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder . . ."*

But Isaiah wrote those words seven hundred years before the birth of Christ.

Besides, the Messianic passages of the Hebrew Bible can be a bit difficult.

You can read lots of things into them.....but a baby?

God in a manger?

The Divine taking on human flesh?

As Gomer Pyle used to say, *"Surprise! Surprise!"*

### III

The year was 1809.

A war-weary world was anxiously watching the march of Napoleon across Europe.

People were discouraged.

Hope for the future was frail.

All the while, babies were being born.

Alfred Lord Tennyson...

Edgar Allen Poe...

Oliver Wendell Holmes...

Felix Mendelssohn...

Charles Darwin...

William E. Gladstone—

destined to be one of England's greatest statesmen—  
and in a log cabin in Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln—  
destined to be our greatest president.

All these were born in that very same year—1809.

One age was dying,  
while another was being born.

This is the way God works—  
quietly,  
steadily.

It really should not surprise us.

We want to look for God in the whirlwind and the storm—  
God speaks in quiet whispers.

We expect to find God among the wealthy and the powerful—  
God is born to a humble couple in the lowliest of circumstances.

Carl Sandburg said it best:

*"A baby is God's opinion that life should go on."*

#### IV

**Listen: Christmas is God's surprising gift to the entire world!**

When God surveyed humanity and realized how dark and difficult our days can be,  
 how confused we get about our identity and our place in the world,  
 how many painful things we do to each other out of that confusion  
 and insecurity,  
 God decided to do something about it.

And so after giving the law and sending the prophets,  
 God got involved...  
 personally and intimately involved with God's fallen creation.

But note: when God decided to get personally involved,  
 God didn't come to punish,  
 or frighten,  
 or scold,  
 or threaten,  
 or any of the other things that are often attributed to God  
 (sometimes even by people in the church!).

Instead, God came to tell us that we are loved—  
 deeply, truly, and forever.

And just to make sure we get the point, God first brought that message embodied  
 in the flesh by Jesus to people the world was pretty sure weren't particularly  
 important or, for that matter, loved:  
 no-account shepherds,  
 an unwed teenage mom,  
 astrologers from the east  
 who practiced a whole different religion.

All this to show that God wasn't going to leave anyone behind.

That God's message of love was for all.

As in *everyone*, whether the world thought you were important or lovable or not.

And that's still the way it is, my friends.

God loves *all* of us,

but especially God wants those who don't feel loved or lovable,  
 those who regularly feel like they're on the outside looking in,  
 those who feel forgotten,  
 and those who wonder what the point of life is...  
 God wants them to hear the "good news of great joy"  
 that God loves all of us.

In the words of St. Augustine: *God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.*

## V

So Christmas comes around once each year to remind us that God's Son has come to earth.

The good news of Christmas is so awesome,  
 so full of wonder,  
 that it's not enough just to talk about it.

We have to burst forth in song.

We have to sing it like we've never sung before!

That is what Christmas is all about.

God sent a baby into the world who grew to adulthood.

He gathered around him men and women whom he called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

And friends, you and I are those men and women today.

We are the ones Christ has called to love the world as he loved it.

We are to be God's Christmas surprise to our families,  
 to our friends,  
 to our community,

to our world.

Can you imagine how surprised our community would be if each person in this room determined to live out the love and joy of Christmas throughout the year?

That is God's surprising plan.

That is God's unexpected gift to humankind.

## VI

In the classic 1947 motion picture, *The Bishop's Wife*, the bishop, played by David Niven, gives a Christmas Eve message that speaks to us of God's surprising gift:

*Tonight I want to tell you the story of an empty stocking.*

*Once upon a midnight clear there was a Child's cry, a blazing star hung over a stable, and wise men came with birthday gifts.*

*We haven't forgotten that night down the centuries. We celebrate it with stars hung on the Christmas tree and the cry of bells and gifts. Especially with gifts.*

*We buy them and wrap them and put them under the tree. You give me a tie, I give you a book, Cousin Martha always wanted an orange squeezer, Uncle Harry can use a new pipe. Oh, we forget nobody. Adult or child. All the stockings are filled. All, that is, except one. We have even forgotten to hang it up. A stocking for the Child born in a manger. It's His birthday we're celebrating. Don't let us forget that. Let us ask ourselves what He would wish for most, then let each put in his/her share: loving kindness, warm hearts, and the stretched-out hand of tolerance, all the shining gifts which make up peace on earth."*

Sisters and brothers, Christmas is God's surprise gift to the whole world.

And when you and I fill Christ's stocking with...

loving kindness...

warm hearts...

and the stretched-out hand of tolerance...

these are the shining gifts which bring peace on earth, goodwill, and hope to all.

As Mother Teresa once said:

*It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you...*

*It is Christmas every time you smile at your brother  
(or sister) and offer him your hand.*

**Instead of being surprised by Christmas,  
let us live the shining gifts of Christmas  
every day of our lives!**

Amen.

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