

“Godly Surprises”

Introduction: As I’ve thought about it over the past few months, one of the activities I’m looking forward to as a grandfather will be the reading of stories to our grandchildren. I recall that our daughters loved to be read to and it became sweet time together. Favorite stories ranged from Cinderella to Winnie the Pooh to Nancy Drew. One of my favorites remains Goldilocks and the Three Bears. What a great story! I mean, you’re deep in the woods, a little girl wandering without her parents, a family of bears who live in a house and eat porridge, the girl found sleeping in the little bear’s bed...what will happen next?! The surprises and the suspense keep you coming back again and again.

We come back again this morning to what is without question the greatest story ever told. There are surprises, there is suspense, there is wondering what the future will hold. Perhaps we keep coming back to it each year because around each corner we find another surprise and we need to make sure what we heard was, really, what we heard! It’s also a story that, if we listen closely, invites us in, invites us to participate, invites us not just to read it again but to respond in some way. As we listen to the beginning of the story (we’ll finish it tonight), listen for what surprises you, and for what you are being invited to.

I. Surprise # 1 – God came to Nazareth.

A. “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee...” Surprise number one: God came to Nazareth. Why didn’t God send Gabriel to an important city, like Jerusalem, Athens, or Rome? Nazareth, you see, was the “armpit of Palestine.” “Can anything good come from there?” one of Jesus’ disciples would later ask him (Jn. 1:46). Located in the northern reaches of the country, inhabitants of the town spoke a rude dialect, were relatively uncultivated, and were not afraid to mingle with pagans. Not only was it the place where Mary lived, it would also become the place where Jesus was raised.

B. If this story was going to be about the coming of the King of kings, it would make far more sense if he came to a Wrentham, or a Wellesley, or a Manchester by the Sea, instead of a place like Roxbury, or Lynn, or Lawrence. . . wouldn’t it? And the contrast with Gabriel’s first visit, to a priest named Zechariah, hinted at in the opening verse with the mention of Elizabeth, his wife, couldn’t be greater. Then, God came to an old man, a priest, in the temple, in the holy city. Now, God was coming to a young woman, a lay person, in her home, in the backwater that was Nazareth. The surprise is that Jesus did not live with a silver spoon, nor did he live a sheltered life. His life began in humility, at the bottom rung of the social ladder. It therefore included participating in the injustices, unfairness, and hardship of life. By beginning in Nazareth, God is telling us that he not only understands these challenges of life that we face, but that he faced them also. As the television ad puts it: “He gets us.”

II. Surprise #2 – God came as a baby.

A. “You will conceive and give birth to a son.” Surprise #2 is that the King of kings and Lord of lords, when he determined that it was right and necessary to come in the flesh, did not appear among us as a wise, older person, full of inspiring platitudes or homely wisdom gleaned from years of experience. No, he came as a baby. Which means, as he experienced our life, he experienced all of it, from the very beginning, from dirty diapers, to breast feeding, to tears from teething, to learning how to talk . . . the list goes on.

B. What's more, what brings more change to your life than the arrival of a baby?! Somewhat ironically, that one born in the stable did not actually bring a more stable life to his parents but instead brought great disruption, disorder, and destabilization to their lives. Following a long journey to Bethlehem to register for a census, and then the difficulty of finding a place to stay and give birth, the trio a bit later had to pick up everything and flee to Egypt in order to escape the murderous intentions of the crazed King Herod. That may all come as a surprise as we look at the sweet, nostalgic, and sentimental cards we get and perhaps send at Christmas, for that wasn't what it was really like at all. And the actual birth? For those of you who have experienced it, as it was accomplished without anesthesia or antiseptics, you can probably confirm that there was nothing sweet or sentimental about it! The point is that quite often God stirs things up, destabilizing our life, enroute to bringing us into newness and wholeness. His coming, we might be surprised to know, does not always make our life easier.

III. Surprise #3 – Jesus was conceived . . . unusually!

A. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Surprise #3, God came as a baby, conceived without the aid of a human father. The question Mary asks is a good one! She was engaged, to a fellow named Joseph, but they had done nothing that would have led to a child, nor did they plan to until they were married. Mary, understandably, was less interested at this point as to the who her baby was to be, than the how he was to come about! Her question was one of mechanics, but the only real answer she got was that conception would take place through the power of the Most High God. The same Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation and brought life into the emptiness (Ge. 1:2) would now hover over – "overshadow" – Mary and bring life into her empty womb.

B. Should Mary need help in believing God could bring this about, the angel encouraged Mary to make a visit to her aunt – Elizabeth – whom God had enabled to conceive (John, who came to prepare the way for Jesus) when she was barren and well beyond child-bearing years. God, the scriptures reveal, is like that. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and now Elizabeth, all given by God miraculous life in their wombs that kept God's promises intact and moving forward. Perhaps, because Mary's child would be different from any other child so would his conception.

IV. Surprise #4 – God came as Mary's Savior.

A. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . ." (1:46f). Mary, we read as the text continues, took Gabriel up on his suggestion and went to spend some time with Elizabeth. It was a three-month visit (1:56), and I imagine these pregnant women enjoyed a rich time together as they reflected on the cousins they were carrying. I imagine it was a time filled with questions, laughter, tears, and most likely, deep scripture study. I offer that latter observation based on the song that Mary composed and sang, sometime during her visit, having confirmed through her time with her aunt that God was indeed at work in her, and in the world, in remarkable ways.

B. It's called the Magnificat, which is Latin for "magnifies," or "glorifies." Note just the beginning, in which Mary rejoices in the fact that this Jesus would not only come to deal with the sins of the world, but her own. He would be her savior, too. This might be a surprise if we come from a tradition that holds Mary needed to be sinless in order to conceive the sinless Son of God. But her words indicate that Mary is not free from sin but is in need of a Savior. Mary, in other words, is not a "porcelain princess" with a halo attached, but, in addition to suffering swollen feet, nausea, headaches and backaches during her pregnancy, Mary is also a sinner in need of forgiveness, just like us.

C. To be sure, the text tells us, twice, that Mary was “favored” by God. But this is a word that describes God’s grace, his undeserved favor. Mary hadn’t needed to qualify for this role of mother in any way; God simply set his love upon her. So, being the mother of God did not exempt her from needing God as her Savior. Maybe we can reword surprise number 4 in this way: Mary is more like us than we might think.

V. Surprise #5 – Mary said “yes.”

A. If Mary is more like us than we think, is there room in our list of surprises for us to be more like her? Because surprise number 5 is that Mary said “yes” to God: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” I offer that Mary’s saying “yes” is a surprise because after all that she goes through, after all that she learns is to be expected of her, she could just as easily have said, “Thanks Gabe, I’ll pass, but I could introduce you to a few other girls who may be willing!”

B. Lauren Winner, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, observes that “to live a life of faith we must let God interrupt us.” Mary was willing to be interrupted, to have the whole course of her life turned upside down, and to risk what people would say about her and Joseph as she began to show before they had come together in marriage. She still, I’m sure, had fears and questions. She certainly didn’t know what the future would hold. But she trusted God enough to say “yes” to the next step. And as we trace her life through the gospel accounts, we see that those steps took her all the way to the cross of her son, and then we see her in the upper room, awaiting with his followers the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Mary for us is a model of discipleship, of one who has experienced the grace of God and who, without knowing all that the future will hold, freely and joyfully says yes to the invitation to participate in God’s work, in her life and in the world. What might be the next step for you? As you ponder this story today, is there in it an invitation from God to which you might say, “yes”?