

The Surprise of Christmas 2017

This Advent Season we have talked about the Comfort of Christmas, the Violence of Christmas, the Good News of Christmas and this morning we are going to talk about the Surprise of Christmas.

It's one of the things you love about Christmas, particularly when you are a kid – the surprise of Christmas. Packages wrapped and under the tree, tantalizing us until Christmas. I can remember looking in closets, hoping to find some unwrapped present, but at the same time wanting to be surprised when the wrapping paper came off and the presents were revealed. We would shake the packages with Mom threatening us if we tore the paper.

Of course the down side is expecting one thing and receiving something entirely different. You saw your husband go into a jewelry store at the mall and you just know he bought you that diamond necklace you wanted. There is one box under the tree with your name on it. It's too big for a necklace, but you assume he is trying to trick you. Christmas comes, you open the box expecting a diamond necklace and it's a George Foreman grill. "Where is my diamond necklace?" "What?" "I saw you going into the jewelry store last week. I know you bought it." "I needed a new battery for my watch... I didn't buy a diamond. But, hey, how about whipping up some burgers for lunch?"

To expect one thing and get something entirely different can be disappointing to say the least. It can throw you off. In life, sometimes we expect God to do one thing and he seems to do the opposite. It's not what we expect and it can affect our faith if we aren't careful.

It's what happened to the Jewish people regarding the coming of the Messiah. They were expecting a Messiah, a king, to come and lead them in a revival of nationalism and ultimately throw off Roman control. They expected a political leader. They expected God to send a Messiah, but they never expected him to send his Son. They expected a king, but never a baby in a manger. They expected a deliverer but never a redeemer that would save them from their sin. They had a list of expectations, but none of the gifts under their tree fulfilled their expectations. The prophet Isaiah had already told them, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel, God with us." But the Jewish people missed it. They had different expectations and when Jesus the Messiah came, the manner and the style in which he came surprised and shocked them. (With recognition to Gayle Erwin and his teaching in *The Jesus*

Style, let's examine the way he came into this world.) Look at the surprise of Christmas.

The surprise of his birthplace. If the God of the universe decided to send his son to be born on earth, wouldn't you imagine some place spectacular? Perhaps a palace like Solomon's, one of the wonders of the ancient world. Instead, Jesus was born in a stable, a place for animals and placed in a manger, a feeding trough for a crib. This was not what was expected. On top of that, Jesus wasn't even born in Jerusalem, the place known as the city of God, but in a little suburb called Bethlehem. Even today it is not necessarily well thought of. The Jews were surprised by his birthplace.

The surprise of his parentage. There were eyebrows raised when word got around that Mary was pregnant and no doubt his enemies would later bring this up to him. There was no belief in the virgin birth back then, either. In biblical times an illegitimate child was to be excluded from the assembly of the Lord. We know he was not, but the question must have been in the minds of some. What a surprise that the Messiah came as an outcast, a cloud of suspicion hanging over him, his birth surrounded by scandal.

The surprise of his ancestry. The Jews were expecting the Messiah to be of a pure lineage of unbroken Judaism, a pure bloodline. As you look at Jesus ancestry, he had a few skeletons in his family closet. Not all of his ancestors were Jews by birth. Ruth was a Moabite, Rahab a Canaanite and a prostitute as well. Not all of his ancestors had a perfect pedigree. Jacob was a cheat, David an adulterer and a murderer, his hands so bloody God wouldn't allow him to build the temple. As you look at his ancestry, you might be surprised at what you find.

The surprise of his birth announcement. I admit, having angels singing at your birth is impressive, but notice who was there to hear the announcement from the angels—shepherds and sheep! The shepherds in that day were not always well thought of. They often were looked down on and yet here they were, being serenaded by angels. The announcement came, not to heads of states, kings and rulers, the wealthy and powerful, but to common working men in the fields. Once again, the unexpected...

The surprise of his physical appearance. Remember the bible says that King Saul stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. Now that's how a king or a Messiah should look. But Isaiah spoke prophetically of the Messiah and said "**He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.**" Isaiah 53:2. Jesus

wasn't a 6 ft tall, blue eyed, blond haired Swede. The average height of a Jewish man in Jesus days was approximately 5'4". There was no halo around his head, no booming voice with violins playing as he spoke. He was so average he could slip through a crowd. Judas had to kiss him in order for the authorities to know which guy to arrest. This was not what we expect in a Messiah.

The surprise of his hometown. Jesus grew up in Nazareth. This was not a great place to live. It had a rough reputation. Nathaniel asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It was not where you would expect to find a king.

The surprise of his possessions. You would think the Messiah, the one who would rule on the throne of his father King David, would have great wealth and live in a palace. But the bible tells us Jesus owned nothing. He was something of an itinerant rabbi, traveling around teaching. He said he didn't even own a house or a bed upon which to lay his head.

It's interesting how ownership is one of the ways we impress each other. He could have impressed us with all he owned, after all, the bible says he owns the cattle on a thousand hills, yet we might have been intimidated by such wealth, afraid to approach him. And wealth usually brings with it power, but Jesus declined both, owning nothing and emptying himself of power.

The surprise of his followers. Jesus surrounded himself with some strange people. To start with, his cousin John (known as "the baptist") was his advance man that went ahead of Jesus, calling people to repent. Wearing a garment made of camel hair and eating locusts and wild honey, he was brash, bold, so outspoken he was put to death because of his preaching.

Look at Jesus' hand-picked followers. Unpolished, none of noble birth, not the kind of fellows you would find in the halls of power. Rough hands, smelling of fish, one was a political zealot and one was a tax collector for the Romans. It was like having Steve Bannon and Nancy Pelosi on your church board. The people he chose and those he still chooses remain something of a surprise. Look at us! It's not always who or what we expect, is it?

The surprise of his nature. He was Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He could have done anything he wanted. He told Pilate he could have called a legion of angels to deliver him from death. He was God in the flesh and could have had his way over everyone and everything. But look at what Paul writes in Philippians 2. **"Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."** Philippians 2:6-7

He who was everything, the one who made everything, who spoke the universe into existence, “made himself nothing” and took upon himself “the very nature of a servant”. One translation says “**he emptied himself**”. King James says he “**made himself of no reputation.**” The things we’ve mentioned about how Christ came, the way he chose to be born and to live, those things describe how he emptied himself, how he made of himself nothing, no reputation. No reputation for being born of nobility or having a great birthplace, no reputation for having a flawless pedigree, no reputation as most handsome or most wealthy, no possessions, no money, no land, no houses, no reputation of a hero’s death, instead he died the death of a criminal, executed by crucifixion with thieves and murderers and buried in a borrowed tomb.

He who made everything and by whom all things hold together, He made of himself nothing. What a surprise. In fact, the one thing he did make of himself was the last thing anyone would have expected. The bible says he took upon himself the very nature of a slave, a servant. He made himself a servant on earth. Verse 6 says he was in very nature God yet Verse 7 uses the same Greek word and tells us his essential nature, his essence, was servant.

The essence of Christmas, the essence of the incarnation is Christ, Immanuel, God with us -- as a servant. Who would have guessed? It is the surprise of Christmas. It is not what we expected. God the Son emptying himself, humbling himself as a servant, and not only that, he became the sacrifice giving his life to atone for our sins. What a surprise, the giver of life became obedient to death, even death on a cross. “**And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.**” **Philippians 2:8**

The surprise of his death. As I said, there was nothing noble about his death, at least not from a natural view point. From a typical bystander’s viewpoint, He certainly didn’t die a hero’s death. He died by execution as a common criminal. Even the Bible said “cursed was anyone who died on a tree.” It appeared he died under a curse, under God’s curse. The prophet Isaiah spoke of it, hundreds of years before, and explained it for us. “**Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.**” **Isaiah 53:4.** They saw him dying on a cross and knew the Old Testament declared him to be cursed by such a death. It’s why the apostle Paul speaks of Jesus’ death as foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling-block to Jews. Surely he couldn’t be the Messiah and die on a cross and the Jews stumbled in surprise.

But Isaiah the prophet explained what they failed to understand. **“We considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** Isaiah 53:4-6

He became a curse for us, bearing all our sins to the cross so we could be made righteous before God. It is not what we expected. Surprised by his birth, surprised by his life, surprised by his death. Oh and there is something else.

The surprise of his resurrection. It didn't all end at the cross. Paul writes in 2 Timothy, **“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel...”** 2 Timothy 2:8-9. Jesus died on the cross, was buried in that borrowed tomb, but on the third day he rose triumphant over death, hell and the grave. Paul gives us the essence of the gospel in one brief statement which is unusual for Paul. Jesus Christ, descended from David, fully man, qualified to sit on David's throne as Messiah and King. And Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, shown by his death and resurrection to be fully God, the eternal king and giver of life. The resurrection shows him to be more than Israel's Messiah. He is Savior and Lord of all who place their hope and trust in him.

It was a surprise that brought hope and life to all of us. He didn't just come for Israel, to be their Messiah. No, the bible says, **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”** 2 Corinthians 5:19. He came for us. He is our Messiah, our Savior and king as well. It is the good news and the great surprise of Christmas!

If we were going to devise a way for God to come into this world and be among us, wouldn't we have come up with a different plan? This one seems so risky. In fact, it was risky, proven by Jesus death on the cross. He came to us with all of the risks. Identifying with us in our poverty, in our humanity and our frailty and weakness, vulnerable to attacks and even to death. It was not what was expected, but it was what was needed.

You see God became flesh and dwelt among us and was tempted in every way just like us. So when we say, “God, you don't understand,” Jesus says, “Oh, but I do. I felt everything you feel. I know about loss and love and life, about pain and hunger, suffering and rejection, betrayal and broken hearts. I know what it is like to be a refuge, to be an alien without a home. I

know about poverty, about being from the wrong race, about injustice. I know life isn't always fair."

He knows because he is Immanuel, God with us in the trenches of life, in the hard times of life. Surprise - God is with us. It is part of the good surprise of Christmas.

I realize Jesus still surprises us at times. He is still doing things that leave me wondering, asking why? But that is nothing new. It's been that way from the beginning. Remember Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist? He was a little surprised the way things were turning out. **"When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" Matthew 11:2-3**

Think about this for a moment. This is the question from John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the man who when Jesus came to him to be baptized said, **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!...I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."** John 1:29, 34.

But now John is in prison and Jesus isn't living up to the expectations John and others had. This isn't how we thought the Messiah would live and speak. Things aren't turning out as I expected. "If Jesus really is the One, the son of God and savior of the world, why doesn't he save me and get me out of this prison? If he is Israel's deliverer, why doesn't he deliver me?"

Sound familiar? If Jesus is all he says he is, then why are things turning out like this for me? This isn't what I expected. I'm left wondering, surprised by the outcome sometimes.

Jesus told John's disciples to tell John what they had heard and seen: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. All of these things were happening, but of course, they were happening to other people, but not to John the Baptist. He was still sitting in the prison cell.

And then notice what Jesus said. **"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."** Matthew 11:6. It could be translated "blessed is the man who isn't tripped up by me, who isn't offended by me, who isn't put off by me." When things don't turn out as you hoped or prayed or desired, Jesus is saying, "blessed is the person who keeps on believing and trusting, who doesn't give up their faith or give up on God. Blessed is the person who doesn't allow the unexpected circumstances of life to trip them up." Blessed is the person who isn't put off by Jesus when he doesn't live up to all of our expectations. Blessed is the person that doesn't

let the surprises of the journey keep them from journeying on with Jesus. But if there are surprises that make you stop and wonder, if that happens, remember, you are in good company.

John the Baptist was in that company. Don't trip and stumble if things are difficult, if expectations aren't met. Keep trusting, keep believing, keep relying on him and know he is Immanuel, God with us even when life catches us by surprise!

I've said so often, **Life isn't fair but God is always faithful.** Let me add something else, part of the surprise of Christmas. Remember His name is Immanuel, God with us. Life happens but because of Christmas, God is with us. **Life happens, but God is always with us!**

There will be surprises all along the journey, some good and some bad. There will be more surprises in 2018, but at every surprise, at every unexpected turn in the journey of life, Jesus will be there with us, just as he is today, to help us, to hold us, to care for us, to lead and guide us. It is the sweet surprise of Christmas. God our Savior and Redeemer is with us.