

## God surprises us with Good News

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 24, 2016

Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20

**Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV):** *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Merry Christmas! Christmas is full of surprises. We hide presents until Christmas day, we keep them a secret and we put them in boxes, cover them in fancy paper and tie them up with ribbons and bows. We enjoy the anticipation of untying and unwrapping and discovering what is inside. We give all of our attention to the surprise that awaits us. Sometimes we might be a little disappointed. Sometimes the gift is something we've wanted for so very long. And sometimes we receive something that we've never thought of—and yet it is the perfect gift for us! Christmas is full of surprises.

The first Christmas had surprises too. Mary and Joseph were a bit surprised by the birth of Jesus, and what timing—while they were traveling, and when there wasn't even room for them in the Inn. They were ordinary people. They weren't champions or experts. But the God of the universe came to them, even in the midst of their struggles. God came to them and was born into this world in such a surprising way.

One of the things I find surprising in this story is how the angels came to shepherds. Most people don't think Shepherds are very important. *They* probably didn't think they were important. Shepherds are very ordinary people. These shepherds were probably just boys out in the countryside looking after sheep—probably looking after someone else's sheep.

But suddenly, an angel appears and tells them the good news of Jesus' birth! A whole choir of angels starts to sing God's praises for this amazing event! God has come to live with us and he is born today in Bethlehem!

This is the best news of all, but why send it to shepherds? The son of God is born—the Messiah, God with us, the king in the kingdom of heaven is born. This is a big deal for the world. God could have sent angels to the halls of power in Jerusalem or Athens or Rome. But he didn't. He didn't even send angels to the little town of Bethlehem. Instead, he sent angels way out in the countryside, out to shepherds living in the fields. They weren't champions or experts. Shepherds weren't kings or rulers, generals or priests. They weren't big in business or powerful in politics. And yet, God had a surprise for them. God has surprises for us too.

There are lots of surprises in our lives. Sometimes they are happy surprises, and sometimes sad surprises. Sometimes we forget about things until a surprise reminds us of what we've forgotten. Sometimes God has a gift for us that we've never thought of before, but it is the perfect gift for us. God is like that. God surprises us all the time. Are you looking for God's surprises?

I had a friend in college named Max. Max had a good life. Max wasn't going through any kind of crisis or pondering any deep questions of life. One day, he was invited to a Bible Study. Max wasn't at all religious. His father's family were Quakers and his mother's family were Jews, but neither were religious at all. So Max thought it would be interesting to learn more about the Bible (from an intellectual point of view).

Then, in one of these Bible Studies, someone asked Max "Max, who is Jesus to you?" This surprised Max. He had always thought of all this religious stuff in an intellectual way. Jesus himself was way at arm's length—2000 years distant. But here was this question: who is Jesus to you? God surprised Max with this question. And Max paid attention. In the middle of an ordinary life, God surprised Max with a fantastic gift that Max had never thought of.

I see this from time to time in people who experience the birth of a child or grandchild. The birth of a baby is a pretty ordinary thing. But sometimes, the wonder and miracle of it all shakes people up and opens their eyes to something beyond themselves. They realize the reality of God and they see more than their career or accomplishments. They start to have a heart for others, and for more than just the new baby. God surprises them and they discover a fantastic gift from God that they had never thought of. All of a sudden, they see God at work in the world, and it opens their eyes to see God's surprises all over the place. They even see how much God loves them.

I know a man who once was very sad. He had a good life and much to be thankful for, but he was overcome by grief when his wife died. He found it hard to see how he could ever be happy again. But God surprised him. He had sort of forgotten God, or at least God was on the periphery of his life at the time. Then some of the men of the church reached out to him and were kind to him. He started to wrestle with his grief and to wrestle with God. He went to Bible studies and church and asked the hard questions that were on his heart.

His grief didn't simply disappear, but he found the power of God's healing presence in his life. He discovered that God had been there for him all along, even when he didn't know it. He

discovered the life giving power of God's grace. He began to see God's surprises all over the place. He saw how much God loves him and loves others. So he reached out to others too.

I knew a woman in Pennsylvania named Ginny. Ginny used to be active in the church. She ran into several health issues and she became very discouraged. People noticed her absence and reached out to her, but she hid herself from them. She had always been someone who helped others. Now she couldn't help others like before. She couldn't walk well, she was sick and in a lot of pain. She didn't think that she deserved people's attention, and she couldn't bear to accept the help of others. This happens sometimes, especially with people who have made horrible mistakes in life. They begin to feel that God could never love them because they don't deserve it. Even without horrible mistakes, ordinary people can hide from God, stuck on the idea of their unworthiness.

But God surprised Ginny. Her friends didn't stop caring for her, and they prayed for her. Slowly, she began to see that people loved her regardless of what she could do for them. Her value wasn't in her service or her status or what she deserved or didn't deserve. She is valuable because God loves her no matter what! Even in receiving the kindness of others she was a blessing to them. She discovered a gift that she had heard about and wanted, but didn't know how to receive. The more she opened herself to God's love, the more she could see God's surprises all over the place. And regardless of her health or ability, she found a joy she hadn't imagined before.

Some people don't think much about God. Some people figure they aren't very important. They think that God is not interested in them. Some people feel that God could never love them. But God surprises them all! It turns out that they all are just as special as those shepherds!

Those shepherds weren't special because of anything they did. They didn't do anything special. And none of the bad things they had done in life kept God away either. They weren't perfect. They didn't earn a special visit from angels—God sent angels to them because God loved them!

The biggest surprise of Christmas is the Good News of God in Jesus Christ—the Good News that God loves you! God loves you not because you are a champion or an expert, a governor or a general, a priest or public servant. God loves you because God loves you! God loves you even if you've made mistakes, and even if you've forgotten how much God loves you—God loves you anyway.

This Christmas, look for God's surprises. Give your attention to unwrapping and discovering the gifts that God has for you. Especially look for the surprise of God's presence and power with you in your ordinary lives, no matter who you are. Remember that God loves you very much, and when God surprises you, embrace God with all your heart!

Merry Christmas!