

Surprise! – Luke 1:26-38

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How many times have we been impacted by surprises? A job promotion we didn't see coming, a disease we didn't foresee contracting, a pregnancy that was unplanned, a phone call or text from a long-lost friend we did not anticipate, or a party on a landmark birthday that totally caught us off-guard. Surprises play a bigger role in our lives than we care to admit.

And sometimes, those surprises have serious consequences.

Take the case of one man who was once on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but no body of the murder victim had been found. In the defense's closing statement, the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all. Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused and surprised by what had just happened, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty.

"But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt. I saw all of you stare at the door."

The surprise issued to the jury by the defendant's lawyer was surpassed only by the one issued to the defense team. The jury foreman replied: "Oh, we looked at the door, but your client didn't."

Surprise!

Surprise defines our world at times. And much of the time, those surprises are unpleasant. The attack by Hamas on Israelis back on October 7, was a tragic, stunning, and, for the Israeli government, an embarrassing surprise.

The tornadoes that took lives and destroyed property in middle Tennessee back on December 9 were an awful surprise to the residents there.

And the periodic stories we hear of celebrities or community leaders doing bad things always bring an element of surprise.

The God we worship isn't afraid to issue more than a few surprises, too. And as believers in God's meting out goodness rather than suffering, we cling to the hope that the surprises that come from God, while perhaps unbelievable and challenging, ultimately come with blessing.

Here in Luke 1 comes a surprise—a surprise that changed the course of the world forever.

God ordains Mary to be the mother of Jesus, the son of God. Mary and the guy she was engaged to wed, Joseph, had plans to consummate their marriage, but before they ever got to that point, the Holy Spirit steps in to anoint this young Jewish girl as the carrier of the Messiah. And Gabriel makes the announcement here.

We've all heard of Mary's trepidation. It's well-chronicled throughout the gospels. She's so surprised that she wonders out loud as to how this could occur. You know, every teen-age pregnancy today most certainly catches families off-guard. While they were fairly common at the time in which Mary lived, this one could not have been predicted. The son of God to be born to a poor virgin girl and her fiancé? They certainly didn't see that coming.

Joseph was, of course, troubled by this news. It was scandalous that his fiancé was now pregnant. He entertained the thought of divorcing her in order for the two of them to avoid the public disgrace.

Then Joseph himself, as we learn in a different gospel account, is surprised in a dream with the news of the impending arrival of the

Lord. And in that dream, the Holy Spirit comforts Joseph and lays out the divine plan for them. From that moment on, Joseph did what God had commanded and took Mary home as his wife.

Here, God surprised both Mary and Joseph at the most unlikely of times. And in doing so, both ultimately were blessed.

More often than not, we are blessed when God somehow comes into our lives unexpectedly. And usually, those moments are filled with grace, comfort, and compassion. God's interruptions into our lives aren't usually in the form of direct conversations or dreams. However, the pleasant surprises that catch us off guard can usually be traced back to this God who came in the form of a tiny child to love us and save us.

Our task is to be open to the surprises of the Lord, open to those moments that often break through the ordinariness of our days.

Writer Patsy Clairmont shared her experience of being surprised by God. She wrote:

"I was riding my bike down a street when I turned a corner. An endless, gray pavement that stretched out to meet the drab curb and dingy sidewalk greeted me. Running alongside the walk was a dusty patch of earth that piled up against a beige wall. Then, into this colorless picture an absurd addition intruded itself. Atop the wall and spilling down its side was a vibrant swath of fuchsia flowers.

"Suddenly," she said, "the boring became breathtaking. The dismal became dynamic. The mundane became magnificent. Like a cup of cool water in a desert, a sudden breeze on a stifling night, a rainbow as the storm clouds part, the unexpected appearance of something grand caused my heart to skip a beat.

"Isn't life often like that?" she asked.

"You're experiencing one of those days when you're tired of yourself, and then someone steps into your landscape and plants words of encouragement. The person values you, and you begin to bloom. Or your work has become a drag, and you think if you have to file one more useless paper, change one more messy diaper, or listen to one more grumbling client, you're going to scream. Then

you receive a promotion, the baby asks to go potty, and the client becomes your husband.

“God tends to use blah settings to display marvels. We mustn’t give up when we experience a succession of gray days and beige encounters. Some stunning surprise awaits us around the next bend.”

God has surprised us before and will surprise us again.

I have a video that was made ten years ago tomorrow. And it’s of the Niemans on Christmas morning around the Christmas tree. Jacob, age 9, and Joey, age 6, are opening Christmas presents. And the unveiling of Joey’s first guitar occurs. He had asked for it; he sensed it was coming. But when his big brother unzipped the case to reveal that shiny red guitar, well, Joseph’s eyes became as big as saucers.

But he didn’t go crazy; he didn’t grab it and start playing with it right away. He was more so in a state of shock, that something so shiny and cool really was for him.

Surprises do this. We often don’t know how to react to them.

So often, though, reality eventually does set in. And we do something in response. In Mary’s case, after this stunning conversation with the Angel Gabriel, and after a bit of the shock that she would bear a son had worn off, she then made that bold declaration: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

There’s always something for us to do with our surprises. Whether they be joyous or challenging, each of them invokes some sort of response. When the shock wears off, what will we do?

When it comes to devastating suffering, we keep going—doing our parts to recover. We re-orient our lives or re-build them. We shift, we adjust, we cope, and we live in the aftermath of the surprise.

The same is true of the joyful surprises. They, too, force us to live in the aftermath. And usually, we act out of gratitude—bringing blessing to those around us, eager to share a portion of the goodness that has been bestowed upon us.

There are many occasions when we really doubt we can be surprised by the entry of something good into our lives. After getting beaten down for a long time, could it really be that an unpredicted or unexpected moment of joyful goodness could come crashing into our lives?

Mary's surprise was a hard one to accept and provided her with great challenge. Yet, she would become a loving mother to this amazing child. She didn't see it coming. She was surprised by the hope this divine conversation had provided. And it gave her great joy.

In Jesus Christ, hope has entered the world. It's a surprise, I know. When the shock wears off, live joyfully into that hope. It's for you.