

Title: *Surprise, It's Christmas!*

Text: Luke 1:26-38

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If we slow down enough on Christmas Eve, and slowing down is half the miracle, you can almost hear it. Not the music yet. Not the bells. Just the soft expectancy of things about to happen. Tonight, the wrapping paper is still intact, and our ribbons on the packages are holding their breath. The room holding our tree and presents is waiting for what to come.

Christmas Eve is like that moment just before a surprise party, when the secret finally slips past our lips with shouts into the air. Everything is already in place, but nothing has been revealed. And that's the way God seems to like it.

Christmas does not crash in with cymbals. Instead, the moment sneaks and slips in sideways. And when the moment finally arrives, the door is cracked open, and the heart is not fully guarded. Grace has a way of finding us quietly, persistently, and almost shyly.

And maybe that's why Christmas morning works its magic. When else in life do we wake up to a room full of mysteries? Boxes stacked like promises. Shapes we can't quite identify but wonder what is concealed. One surprise after another until just when you think the wonder is spent, there's one more hiding behind the tree.

As a child, I remember thinking the day itself felt enchanted as if the world had leaned closer. As if joy weighted it. On Christmas morning, anything seemed possible. As we grow older, of course, surprises don't always sparkle. Some surprises arrive wrapped in hospital gowns or late-night phone calls. Some knock the wind out of us. Some change everything, some define our lives with the moment before and the moment after.

But one thing we know is true: surprises are never dull and boring. Life, it turns out, is stitched together with them.

This past year, this trembling, unsettled year, has reminded us of that again. The world feels jumpy. The news reads like an Advent scripture text on repeat: people walking in darkness, nations stumbling, hearts failing from fear. We know surprises are coming. We can sense their presence on the horizon, but we don't know which kind.

That's why I think of Albert Schweitzer. One evening, buried under papers, lectures half-written, the mind crowded and tired, he flips through the mail. Junk. Junk. Junk. Then, a magazine he recognizes but realizes is not meant for him at all. Misdelivered. Given to him by mistake.

Although it was not his, he took a moment to open it, looking for a good story to read, and he landed on an article about a mission hospital in the Congo. And there, almost like a sentence underlined by God, he reads: *"The need is great... and it is my prayer that God will lay a hand on one on whom the Master's eyes have already been cast to come and help us."* Schweitzer closes the magazine. Sits still. And later writes in his journal, *"My search is over."*

Was it really the wrong mailbox? Was it a coincidence? Or one of those divine surprises that arrive looking ordinary until you realize everything has changed? What we can say is that the moment was a moment before and then a moment after for Albert Schweitzer and the world.

Christmas is like that and comes to us not as an announcement to the powerful, but as a whisper to the overlooked. Not to a king, not to a scholar, but the surprise comes to a teenage girl in a town so small we'd miss it if we blinked.

And the first surprise isn't the pregnancy. That's what we think at first glance. Notice the first surprise is the greeting: "*Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you.*" That's where Christmas always begins. Not with glory. With reassurance.

Mary was young, so young that we tend to romanticize her because the truth makes us uncomfortable. And Gabriel does not explain everything, nor does he soften the implications. He says what she needs to hear before anything else: *God is with you.* Because, of course, she is afraid.

We call it the virgin birth, a phrase polished smoothly by centuries of repetition, but Mary was living it forward, not backward. This wasn't theology. This was a risk. This was a misunderstanding. This was the possibility of shame, rejection, and even danger.

"This can't be," she says. "You must have the wrong house." But God knows our home address and definitely knew Mary's.

And before Mary can spiral into loneliness, God gives her a sign—not a proof, but a companion. Elizabeth. Another impossible pregnancy. Another body saying 'yes' to God in a different key.

God does not drop surprises on us and walk away. That's not how God works. Instead, God places witnesses nearby. Someone who can say, "You're not imagining this. Something holy is happening."

Still, fear lingers. What about Joseph? But God has already been there too. Another angel. Another, "*do not be afraid.*" Christmas begins as a chorus of courage whispered into anxious hearts.

And then comes the bewildering part: "*You will conceive and bear a son.*" Let's stop for a moment and smile here and say, "*Of all the stages God might choose—Rome, Jerusalem, the Temple—God chooses a womb.*" And not just any womb, but a peasant girl's womb.

God entrusts the salvation of the world not to force, but to flesh. Not to spectacle, but to vulnerability.

And once we get past the shock, the story is almost painfully ordinary. A baby. A feeding trough. Rough hands learning to hold a fragile life. Sleepless nights. Scraped knees. Calloused palms. A child who learns to speak by listening. To pray by watching. To love by being loved.

John doesn't say the Word became impressive. As Ann read on Sunday evening, our writer says the Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us. In other words, God moved into the neighborhood.

This is where the theology deepens and where the scandal sharpens. God's greatest act was not thunder or fire or parted seas. God's greatest act was the incarnation of the flesh born. Not power displayed, but power restrained. Not distance, but the intimacy of a mother and child.

Fully human. Fully divine. Not a god pretending to be human. Not a human climbing toward godhood. But God chose the long road of skin and breath and tears. Because if God were only

human, we could not be saved. And if God were only divine, God could not stay with us. So God came as both.

Which means this is the part we often miss: God has committed everything about God's self to this world. To bodies. To history. To time. To us. In 2025, with all its noise and fracture and fear, Christmas says God has not withdrawn. God is not silent this night! The song is wrong! Because God has not decided we are too much trouble. Absolutely not! God has come closer than ever.

As close as a newborn's breath. As near as the weight of a child in our arms. And maybe—maybe—there is still a surprise making its way to us. Something was misdelivered, but we need to read it. Something unexpected is embedded in the story that we need to hear. A word you didn't know you needed. Listen! Listen!

*Do not fear. I am with you. Unto you is born this day a Savior.*

This is not a story we master, put together, wrap in a nice bow, and place under a tree. Instead, the surprise of Christmas is a gift we receive, Emmanuel, God with Us, Jesus!

So tonight, let's not rush past the manger. Stand there. Let the straw scratch your hands. Let the child breathe. Let the surprise settle.

Because this is the truth Christmas dares to tell in a frightened world: God does not save us from a distance. God does not shout instructions from heaven. God comes close—close enough to be held, close enough to be hurt, and close enough to be trusted.

This child is not an escape from the world. This child is God's decision to stay in it.

And if God has chosen flesh, then no life is disposable. If God has chosen a poor child, then no place is godforsaken. If God has chosen to arrive in the dark, then no night is beyond hope.

So, when fear whispers that the world is unraveling, Christmas answers: *God is here*. When anxiety tells you that you are alone, the manger says: *You are not*. When the future feels fragile, the child in the straw says: *So am I—and I am God-with-you*.

This is our most fantastic surprise of all. Not that God exists. But that God comes this way.

And tonight, once again, heaven leans low. The world holds its breath. And love is born not to impress us, not to overpower us, but to stay.

That is the Christmas surprise. Thanks be to God.