

San Marino Tribune 12/21/18 “The Surprise of Christmas”

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Christmas approaches and we are almost ready. One more day to wrap the presents, pick up the rest of the groceries, bake the pies. We know who is coming to dinner. If we plan it just right, there will be no surprises. Everything managed and anticipated. The best surprise is no surprise! But if that is the case, then we are not ready, because Christmas is to celebrate God’s supreme surprise. Imagine Mary waking up, going about her chores, and suddenly, without warning, a stranger appears and tells her she is going to have a child. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is WITH you. . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.” She is not physically or emotionally ready for this news. This upsets the plans she and Joseph have to marry. This will bring embarrassment to her family. She is surprised and puzzled by this messenger telling her “For nothing will be impossible with God.” And to her credit, Mary has the strength to reply, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Most of us don’t handle God’s surprises very well. We have our own plan. The guests arrive at 3:00 p.m., we’ll attend the Christmas Eve pageant at church, then it is dinner immediately following worship. The kids are only allowed to open one gift before bed. Christmas morning the oven goes on precisely at 7:00 a.m. No surprises please! But we don’t learn the lesson that, since God is with us, life will definitely have some surprises. What if, as we go about our tasks, God is trying to get our attention, to give us a gift? “Greetings favored one! God is WITH you.” What if we suddenly discover a new challenge to be met? What if we are confronted with some human need that we didn’t expect? Ever notice how the gifts God gives always require something from us, as it did for Mary?

Some gifts are simply more complicated than others. So beware of gifts this year marked, “Assembly Required.” While some gifts are merely decorative, others are meant to be assembled, worn and used; like a baseball mitt you need in order to play the game, or a grill that enables you to cook something enjoyable. Faith is a gift that is intended to be used. It’s a gift that keeps on giving, but only if we make use of it as intended by the giver.

If we choose, we can see the world through a different lens, where the Lord is present and is moving toward salvation. We can show concerns for others and work for a world where everyone has food to eat, and a place to lay their head; where everyone can make a living and every child is safe. We can strive for a world that belongs to God -- not to greed or envy or pride or evil -- but a world where plain people, like you and me, can make impossible contributions participating in God’s redemption of the world. Some gifts are complicated and require assembly. Be empowered by God’s surprising gift of himself on Christmas. God is WITH us, so be ready for some surprises that will remind you of his presence and that invite you to come and “see this thing that the Lord has made known.” Life’s surprises are gifts from God. Be ready, unwrap the gift and assemble your faith.