

The Surprises Jesus Brings

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Matthew 1:18-25

Good morning First Presbyterian Church! The Scripture text this morning comes to us from Matthew 1:18-25, read from the English Standard Version. Let us pray that the eyes of our hearts would be open to the message God has for us this morning.

Prayer for Illumination

(Pray)

We have a word of surprise, joy, and challenge for us this morning. Let's inhabit this passage together and see what God wants to reveal to us as we embrace the Christmas promise. May this story be made new in our eyes and hearts today.

Matthew 1:18-25

The Birth of Jesus Christ

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to

take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”*

(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Intro

Good morning and happy Christmas season everyone! Christmas is just around the corner, so let us seek to deeply receive afresh the truths deeply embedded in the Christmas narrative. Friends, there are incredible treasures in today’s passage. My sermon today is titled “The Surprises Jesus Brings.” I want us to look together at the three surprises Jesus brings when he enters the story. He surprises us with 1.) The story he writes for us, 2.) who he is, and 3.) his nearness. Let’s jump in.

Jesus Surprises Us With The Story He Writes For Us

Today's Scripture focuses on the experience of Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus. Like us, Joseph had plans for how he imagined his life would go. A humble life of carpentry in his hometown of Nazareth. He likely desired to settle down with a wife, have children, and observe the practices of a first century Jew. We know that Joseph was a good man, with a heart bent towards compassion, justice, and holiness. We also have reason to believe that he was a simple man. In my study of Joseph, one writer notes that there are no records anywhere in the New Testament of Joseph speaking nor is he spoken to except for by angels. All we see is that he acts in faithfulness, quietly. He might have been the type to keep his head down and stay out of trouble.

So it was likely distressing to him to one day learn that his betrothed was pregnant! This would have been even more distressing than we can imagine today. In First century Judaism betrothal was more serious than how we view engagement. Notice that the text says to exit a betrothal would mean "divorce," and that he is referred to as Mary's "husband" before they are officially married. And so Joseph decides rather than to put her to shame with a public divorce, or even worse, a stoning, he decides to quietly exit this obligation, so that he can be united with a woman who had never been with a man.

And here's the wild thing. Mary had not been with a man. Things were not as they seemed. An angel visits Joseph and reveals the truth of the matter, that Mary was carrying the Messiah and that she had conceived through the Holy Spirit. Joseph believed and obeyed the angel, taking Mary as his wife and naming the child Jesus. So Joseph enters a story he didn't expect. One that wouldn't just change his immediate life,

but his entire life, and actually his eternity. Joseph would need to learn to walk by faith as he and Mary welcomed Jesus into the world in a barn in Bethlehem. He would need to walk by faith when they fled to Egypt from Herod as refugees. He would need to walk by faith as he raised Jesus. Tradition says that Joseph died before Jesus' public ministry began, and so Joseph would have walked by faith, trusting God would finish what He started in bringing Jesus into the world.

So here's a question for us today. When in your story did you expect your life to zig, but Jesus caused it to zag? This is an indication that he has entered your story. Things have gotten shaken up. Something hard or different comes on the scene and Jesus intends to redeem it, allowing it to be a cause for blessing in your life and an advancement of the gospel. Jesus has surprised you with how thoroughly different your story has gone because of his entrance into your life. C. S. Lewis puts it beautifully in *Mere Christianity* when he says this:

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

One thing we can say for sure is that Jesus prioritizes our transformation more than he prioritizes our comfort. Can I get an amen to that? His stories often take a different shape than what we'd like, at least initially.

When I was 17, I had a nice plan for my story. I would jump head first into theological training through my undergrad and seminary and then ministry work. I would get married right after college, be ordained by 26, and be on my path to being the next Billy Graham. My story was all about up and to the right! Surely that's a good story right? There are good aspects to it, but God is more concerned with getting through to me how much He loves me than He is concerned about me having a big ministry impact. What did he do instead? He led me through a journey of growth in wisdom through pain and heartache, and through the struggle of severe chronic illness, plucking me out of seminary and bringing me back to my hometown to be loved and learn what humility is and where the kingdom of heaven really lies. He showed me the difference between what Andy Crouch called "the charmed life" and "the blessed life." The charmed life is when things go as we like them, a nice home, a nice family, good health, a great career. These are good things to be sure! And these are what Joseph would have rightly hoped for. But I think there is a gift to the "blessed life"—one that encounters God through weakness, sorrow, and struggle. If Jesus grew up poor and anonymous in Nazareth, maybe knowing him would mean that we might taste something of what he experienced. What aspects of your life feel more like Nazareth than Jerusalem? More like Battle Creek than New York City? It may be that God is showing you the kingdom by leading you to the low things and low places.

Has Jesus shaken up your story? Have you encountered him in the low places? If you find yourself there this Christmas, take courage, God is there with you. One of the great passages of the Bible comes from Isaiah 57:15. Here the Lord's Word for you:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,

who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

"I dwell in the high and holy place,

and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,

to revive the spirit of the lowly,

and to revive the heart of the contrite.

And here is my invitation to you if your story is more of the "charmed life" and you desire more of Jesus and more mystical experiences with him. Carefully consider this prayer before you pray it, because it could mean a lot of change comes your way. But if you are ready to encounter him no matter the cost, pray in your heart—"Lord whatever it takes, I want to know you and the power of your resurrection." Paul's life included this radical desire to know Jesus. He puts it this way in Philippians 3:8-11-

8 *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ* **9** *and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—* **10** *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* **11** *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Paul was radically caught up with Jesus. May that be said about us here at First Pres.

So Jesus surprises us by writing a different story than we would have written, a far more epic one. Let's move on to the second point.

Jesus Surprises Us With Who He Is

First century Jews were very familiar with their Bibles, what we call the Old Testament. The Bible Project often calls the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole "Messianic Literature." That is, the Bible and the Jewish people were anticipating "the anointed one," *Messiah* in Hebrew and *Christ* in Greek. This anointed one would be a "son of David," and so fulfill the Old Testament prophecy in 2 Samuel 7:

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son... 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:12-14, 16)

This was the most common expectation of the Messiah—that he would reign on David's throne and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory. And this was an urgent expectation; the Israelites were oppressed by the Roman occupation and suffered greatly under this regime. Jesus actually does fulfill this prophecy because Joseph is in David's line and when Joseph obeys the angel and names the boy Jesus, he is effectively adopting Jesus. This act fulfills the covenant that God made with David

and Israel 1,000 years earlier. But He doesn't fulfill this Covenant in the immediate way that the Jewish people expect.

He is called Jesus because he will "save his people... from their sins." Those last three words would have been another surprise. Those waiting for the Messiah wanted physical deliverance. And we cannot blame them, they were a suffering people! Are we not the same way? We want Jesus to deliver us from our suffering and afflictions rather than from ourselves and the sin that holds us captive. But God, our good father, knows what we need.

This pattern is quite interesting in Paul's letters as well. Every community that he writes to is suffering or oppressed in one way or another. But at the beginning of these letters, you never hear him pray for deliverance from suffering or oppression but for the church to grow in knowledge of God's love and to hold fast to what they believe. The Bible does not discourage us from praying for deliverance from pain and loss—we should definitely bring that to God and ask for His help! God cares tenderly about our agony, so always go to Him! And there will be a day when death, sickness, and pain are no more, when every tear is wiped away! But the Advent of Jesus and New Testament makes this clear; sin will harm us far more than suffering will. In fact, with faith and trust in God's plan, suffering can actually make us more beautiful, faithful people.

And so this is why many reject Jesus. We are tempted to want a vending machine God instead of a real, personal God. We want to put religion into the God we fashion and get a comfortable life in return. But God wants a deeper, grittier relationship built on trust and love. God shows us in Jesus that following Him means we need to be

willing to be surprised and even disappointed in who he is in the short run. But if we trust Him, the promise is far more glorious than we could ever ask or imagine. We know this is true of Joseph, who as I said before is believed to have passed away before Jesus began his public ministry. But now Joseph sees the full picture—that Jesus came to atone for sin and proclaim his coming kingdom, one where everything will be made right, and all things are made new.

I want us to hear the words of the prophet Isaiah when he describes the Messiah we received in the first century. He says:

*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.*

3 *He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

4 *Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.*

5 *But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:2-5)*

If you have not wrestled with this strange plan of God to bring a savior that looks like this, then I invite you to really take a look this morning. Jesus comes to save us from sin and not always immediately from suffering. And now we are seeing that Jesus himself would suffer to save us?? This is a hard teaching at first, but with time, I think

we will learn to cherish the profound humility and love of God in Christ. Did you know that Christianity is the only world religion that claims that God suffers? Jesus surprises us with who he is. We ought to spend time with the Scriptures so that we don't miss this. I was talking with some of our high schoolers during an advent Bible study about this idea. Maybe we miss God because we are looking too high to see Him. Maybe we need to look for Him and His kingdom in the low places. I want you to see Jesus this morning—he is far different than what we would naturally expect. He is far better.

Jesus Surprises Us With His Nearness

We have one final surprise this morning. Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” While the Jewish people expected a Messiah who would rule as God's representative, they did not expect that this Messiah would be God Himself. God desires to be near to you and me, so much so that He actually has come to Earth to know us and make Himself known.

Many of you know that I recently got engaged to a woman that I love with my whole heart. We are in the process of planning our wedding and preparing for her move to Michigan. Why are we doing this? Because we want to be near each other because of our love! I think one of the great beauties of what we believe as Christians—God's heart is burning with passion for His creation and so He wants to be as near as possible to us. The great barrier to this nearness is the depth of our sin. God is perfect and holy, creating a major dilemma for us, for God cannot embrace sin. Walk with me through a

brief 30,000 foot view of the Bible to see how God makes a way for our nearness to Him.

We were made for the Garden of Eden, where we had perfect union with God. Adam and Eve would walk with Him in the cool of the day. After the tragic fall of man in disobedience to God, they were cast out of Eden, and the pervasiveness of sin led to a separation, a ruptured relationship. Fast forward to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. God gives Moses instructions on how they can meet with Him. They are to construct a tabernacle and with it they are given many laws and a sacrificial system, pointing to the need to atone for sin and for us to be righteous before God to dwell with Him. Perhaps the most profound example of this is the annual day called Yom Kippur or the “day of atonement” where the high priest would be allowed to enter what was called the “Holy of Holies.” This was the innermost space of the tabernacle where God’s glory would dwell. Now there was no guarantee that the high priest would survive this occasion because God’s holiness was so pure and His presence is a consuming fire. Do you see God’s holiness? We miss this in our culture today. It is a HUGE deal that God could draw near to us without us being incinerated.

So with this image in mind, let us notice the language of a less popular Christmas text found in John’s gospel. He says this in chapter one verse 14.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

In the Greek, the language of Jesus—the Word—“*dwelling among us*,” could be literally translated that he “tabernacled” among us. Many believe this is pointing to

God's glorious presence as found in the Holy of Holies to be contained in Jesus. Jesus is that presence with us. But it keeps getting better. Do you remember what happened in the temple after Jesus was crucified? The four inch thick veil which separated the inner court of the temple from the Holy of Holies was *torn*. How? *From top to bottom*. Jesus paid the penalty for sin, justifying us so that we can be in God's presence! God is on a mission to be close to us! Do you see Jesus' mission? He is God with us, so that God could be with us! I'm not even done yet!

In the upper room Jesus said that it was good for him to leave his disciples, why? Because then he would send his Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This means that now God is not just with us, but IN us through His Holy Spirit! You have the Spirit of Jesus in you! Paul also deepens this. He shows that by faith we are united to Christ so we are IN him! So He is in us, and we are in Him! In Ephesians 2, Paul says that now the church is the new temple, where He dwells in glory whenever we gather in unity. Here's what he says in Ephesians 2:

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

I know this is like drinking from a fire hose, but there is one more layer I want us to see regarding the surprise of God's nearness. I want you to take in these words. This

is what Jesus began to bring by his birth on Christmas. These words are from Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

God will dwell with us. God is moving towards us. There will be no obstruction, no barrier, only unity and intimacy with our infinite, holy, beautiful God. This will be an experience beyond our wildest dreams.

This is not simply about religion. We are not making our way to God. He is making His way to us. For those of us who love Jesus, I want you to meditate on this this Christmas. Treasure it in your heart the way that Mary did. Obey and trust like Joseph did. We see the big picture that they didn't have, so we have less of an excuse to not trust God on the winding path to His kingdom. For those of us here who don't yet trust Jesus, I encourage you to take these Scriptures seriously. God is holy and just and is moving toward us—so we must be ready. You don't have to be more religious. You don't have to have your life together. All you need to do is put your trust in Jesus. God

really is this beautiful, and He wants your heart. He surprises us by the story He writes for us, by who He is, and by how near He is. He is God with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And all God's people said—
Amen.