



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 4 Year B

Surprised by God

[RCL] 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Mary was not expecting visitors, and she certainly was not expecting a visit from the Angel Gabriel. But there he was, with the afterglow of divine light fresh on his robes standing before her. “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you!” Not your typical greeting. Who says stuff like that? Is he trying to impress someone? Mary is a nobody, in a village filled with nobodies, no need to waste grand angelic pronouncements on her. Gabriel’s presence is more than enough to impress.

“Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God.” Do not be afraid? How can Mary not be afraid? Angels don’t come to Nazareth and they most certainly don’t come to poor peasant girls like Mary. God doesn’t find favor with the likes of her. The angel must be mistaken. Perhaps he is lost. Maybe he is looking for a different Mary. But he keeps talking. Mary is perplexed and afraid.

“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Surprise! How can this be? No great ruler has ever come out of Nazareth. And yet here is the angel, speaking of ancestors, and throne and kingdoms. It makes no sense. Why choose a barely engaged teenager to carry God’s son? Why not? If Elizabeth, like Sarah before her, could bear a son in her old age there is nothing impossible with God. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary’s surprise is our surprise. Thousands of years later God’s call still mystifies us, still has the power to provoke us to wonder and awe. The news from God is frequently too good to be true and messengers are often wholly unexpected and astonishing, but the message remains the same: God will always surprise us.

God is in the business of surprising us over and over and over again. Scripture is filled with God showing up in the most unlooked-for places and the unlikeliest of people. People have encountered the God of wonder in bushes that burn, donkeys that talk, raging whirlwinds, pillars of fire, and under starry night skies. God has a way of amazing us on the tops of mountains, at wells in the noonday sun, and strangers bearing gifts. No matter how often we look for God in the familiar places, God will somehow be revealed in the unexpected, the unlooked-for, and the unpredicted.

Jesus’ birth to an unwed teenaged mother, in a backwater town a little north of nowhere, was perhaps God’s biggest surprise of all. No great kings or rulers to welcome the Messiah—instead, the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast attended the birth of God made flesh. No fanfare, fireworks or finery for the

Prince of Peace, just a manger bed on an average night, punctuated by the message of the angels and the bewilderment of shepherds. God surprised the world in the extraordinarily ordinary birth of Jesus.

As we make our way once more with the shepherds and angels towards Bethlehem, we celebrate God's favor for the last, the lowest, and the least. At Christmas, we rejoice with Mary that Jesus is God's biggest surprise. With this tiny helpless child in Mary's arms, we see God making the common holy, the mundane mighty, and the everyday extraordinary. We are called to revel in God's continued choice of the unexpected.

This is the good news at Christmas and beyond: that God is found not in a mansion but in a manger, not in a palace but in a poor house. The Good News about Jesus that we, as the Church, here, now, today are called to preach, is that we will be surprised at who God chooses to deliver the message of hope. Yet still we look for God in the halls of power and privilege. But that is not the message of the God of the universe and it is not the message of the angel.

In a world filled with wars and rumors of war, injustices, and violence, we need the message of the angel. For those who are searching and seeking a different way, God finds us in our need and raises us up. Our world is desperate for Good News.

The neglected, forgotten, and the left out are in need of the message of hope found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the son of Mary. For us as a church to be relevant, we need to be bearers of the Good News that God stands with the left out, the lonely, and the lost. Our world is in need of God's mystery and awe and surprise. But too often, we as the church find comfort in the known, the recognized, and the familiar. We like safe, we like certain, we like stability, but with God, we are never safe, or certain, or stable.

As we turn our gaze towards Christmas, the question we who look for and follow Jesus must ask ourselves is this: Have we heard the stories so often that we fail to see or share the surprise? Have we drained so much of the mystery from the world that we are no longer able to be startled by the workings of God? Have we failed to recognize Jesus in the passing touch of a hand, the fleeting beauty of a smile, the gentleness of a word of encouragement? Our lives, our communities, and our world are filled with God's surprise if we stop long enough to recognize it.

When we domesticate the divine and muzzle the mysterious we leave little room for God to work in and through us. When the mystery of God is regimented, regulated, and relegated to be contained within four walls on any given Sunday, we have ceased to seek the surprise of God's in-breaking into our world. And yet, God still finds a way to get our attention and fill us with surprise.

As people of God, as God's beloved, we are called like Mary to fall into the uncertainty of God. We are called to let our lives, our hearts, and our eyes be open for glimpses of the divine so that we may follow in the way that Jesus has led.

To be amazed by God means that in Christ Jesus there is no work, no ministry, no person beyond our compassionate reach. If we are to be interrupted by God, we like Mary and Joseph must risk stepping out on faith into an uncertain future, knowing that God is out there waiting with just one more surprise.

When we are surprised by God, our hearts are set free, our burdens are lifted and our fear fades. Like Mary, when we encounter the divine mystery, we can only respond in joyful song. As we journey to the

manger once more, may we seek once again to be surprised by a God who finds favor in us, who has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. May we in our lives and our living magnify the Holy One, may we be messengers of God who seek the divine in the midst of the ordinary and may we in joyful song proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Amen.

A priest, a parent, and a (recovering) perfectionist, the Rev. Deon K. Johnson is a native of Barbados who has questioned Michigan winters in his eleven years as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich. Deon's passion for inclusion, welcome, and worship geekiness has led him to be trained as a Liturgical Consultant, helping communities of faith re-envision their worship and worship spaces to better reflect the beauty, mystery, and all-around awesomeness of following Jesus. Deon graduated from Case Western Reserve University and the General Theological Seminary. When he isn't ruing temperatures below fifty degrees, Deon enjoys traveling, biking, hiking, and spending time with his family.