

Surprise!

Galatians 4:4-7

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The Bible is filled with surprises.

Out of nothing God created the heavens and the earth. Only one family was left high and dry, as righteous Noah sailed the ark to dry ground. Looking at the history of the Jewish people their whole incredible story begins with a man, who was a hundred years old and his wife, over ninety, having a baby.

Surprise!

An outcast people, slaves in Egypt, despised by the most powerful nation with no land of their own, all but forgotten and yet through miracle after miracle or, if you like, surprise after surprise, became God's chosen people set free by a man named Moses, who could have just as well drowned when his mother set him afloat on the Nile as an infant. Committing a murder, he became a fugitive, trying to dodge God's summons he ran off to the desert, and then was recruited at an advanced age, I might add, to become God's spokesman and God's chosen leader marching the Hebrews out of Egypt through the Red Sea on dry ground as they made their way towards the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Surprise!

When the Prophet Samuel was looking for a king to lead the nation no one thought to call David away from tending the sheep, the least demanding of all jobs on the farm and yet he was chosen and anointed king not for what anybody saw in him – not his father, his brothers, not even Samuel – but because of what God saw in him. The

greatest king of all Israel started out as a shepherd boy, the one no one paid attention to, virtually unarmed, except for five smooth stones. He defeats a giant with a single rock only to become King of Israel fulfilling the Covenantal promise towards the future reign of the Jeshua, Jesus, the Messiah.

The point of these few stories is that God always keeps his covenant. You can trust God. God is faithful to his word. God's timetable may not be as we would like, but God is faithful.

On this first Sunday of Advent we begin a new liturgical year as we turn to the birth of Jesus. Luke begins his story by putting it into an Old Testament perspective. He sets the stage by saying, "In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah who had a wife named Elizabeth."¹ Another old couple, childless, not unlike Abraham and Sarah.

Luke only tells us they were "righteous before God" No one ever expected they would have a baby, but surprise again. They name their boy John, who became known as John the Baptizer.

Life is sometimes that way – filled with unanswered prayers, merely echoes of a deep down ache, hurt and disappointment, and then like Job, Abraham, and Sarah, Hanna and her sisters, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, God's eternal covenant fulfilled changes the picture and that's the point of Luke's story. The story of the Annunciation – the greatest surprise of all.

In the Old Testament God most often spoke to men or through men, usually old men. The angel came to Abraham, not Sarah, and in the opening of the New Testament the angel came to Zechariah, not Elizabeth. Even Matthew's gospel has an angel speaking to Joseph, not to Mary.

¹ Luke 1:5

But after setting the stage with old Zechariah and barren Elizabeth, Luke has the angel speak directly to Mary. Not an old lady well beyond menopause, but to Mary who most say was a teenager. A virgin, which spoke of her sexual purity, but more it underlined the fact that she was young, an adolescent.

The angel Gabriel said, "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 and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High and of his kingdom there will be no end. Mary replied, 'How can this be?' The angel said, 'Nothing will be impossible with God.'"

Surprise! Miracle of miracles.

God acted once again, not through patriarchs or priests, but through a lowly peasant girl, not an old lady, but a young virgin. God's covenant, God's promise continues with a new twist at the birth of Jesus. We should know from the other stories that God always keeps his promise, his covenant in ways we would least expect. The nativity story should convince us that God will act at any time, at any place and through anyone, even a young girl named Mary. So don't ever say it's too late or God has forgotten my prayer or God would never use me.

God loves miracles, loves to pull surprises, the unexpected, but because we are so stubborn, so narrow minded, so mean spirited, so dull witted.

Some of us really don't believe God can redeem our situation, our heartaches, but in truth miracles happen, surprises await to be born each and every day. That's why we celebrate Advent. So that some of us might be stopped dead in our tracks and say, "What will God do next?" So that some of us hard-headed 'bah humbug' types might stumble over the Christmas story and as we pick ourselves up might be tempted to ask, "What does the Advent season really mean for me?"

The season of Advent should leave each one of us walking towards these next days and into a new year, not with dread, but with great anticipation as we ask ourselves, “What will God do next?”

Back in the opening of Luke’s story everyone thought Rome was the most important center of the world while in the seemingly unimportant little town of Bethlehem, a Savior was being born according to the covenant promises of God. Does that encourage you?

If you are praying for peace in this world, praying for justice, if your heart breaks with the things that break the heart of God, if there is some enemy inside you, or a fear in your heart that your life will never matter, if you believe there is no hope for your child ever to confess Christ or your fear of death invades your dreams and your waking moments then the season of Advent is for you. Because Advent says that behind what we think impossible, God is still working, transforming the world beyond our understanding, quietly working according to God’s timetable, not ours and in ways God chooses, not in ways we would ever expect.

Let me circle back to our morning’s lesson for the biggest surprise of all. The Apostle Paul writes, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law (are you listening) in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba Father.’ So you are no longer a slave but a child and if a child, then also an heir through God.”

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find God addressed as Father. God is sometimes describes as a father, but not addressed as “Abba”, Daddy. Jesus always addressed God this way, in his prayers, the way children everyday talk to their beloved Father, their Daddy, their Papa, their “Abba”. Because of Advent, because God keeps his covenantal promises, because God’s covenant has never been broken from the foundations of the

world, you and I are invited into an unprecedented intimacy with God by receiving adoption as children of the Living God.

The gift of Advent, the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the Anointed one, the Son of the Living God gives us the privilege of addressing God the Father with intimacy, “Abba”, Daddy. This intimacy gives us the freedom to share ourselves, to express ourselves fearlessly in God’s presence.

Let me be perfectly clear. We must still be aware of the majesty and awesome glory of God, but because of Advent, because of the birth of Jesus, you and I can relate to God as “Abba,” Daddy.

The golden age for the Christian is not just looking at our past. The lessons from the Old Testament, the stories we know by heart, the wonder of the gospels, are not for us just to reminisce about the good old days. Our everyday faith experience, our life in Christ, immerses us wholeheartedly in the present for which the past provides a solid foundation of promise.

Advent comes to reassure us that we are not subject to diminishing opportunities, diminishing energies, diminishing freedoms. Each day now opens us to be surprised by God.