

A Surprising Christmas (Week 1) - A Surprising God
Yesterday's Sermon - Summary

Can we be surprised by God this Advent?

Can we be surprised by how God has come?

In order to redeem the world, God needed to become part of the world. Or, as St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the great theologian from the 300s CE, said it: "That which is not assumed by God cannot be redeemed by God." In other words, if God didn't become part of the natural world, God could not save the natural world.

God so loved the world, John 3.16 declares, that He came to its rescue. He didn't tell us to fix the mess we've made; He came to show us how. He was an artist entering His own painting, He was a musician becoming the melody within his own song, He who is the potter became the clay.

In the words of C. S. Lewis: "God comes down, down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity, down further still...He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him."

So, at the very least, God doesn't merely exist, God comes to us. He is not passive, He takes the initiative. He does not merely wait for us to seek Him, but instead seeks us. Frederick Buechner, in his book *The Clown in the Belfry*, puts it this way: The Christian story...is not just that God is, which...is a lot to swallow in itself much of the time, but that God comes. Comes here. Comes here for us."

In this great truth is a great comfort - no matter how desperate our plight, no matter how lost or broken we may feel, because our God came to us at Christmas, we know He will keep on coming for us.

Can we be surprised that it takes God to tell us how to be human?

It is not enough for God to tell us about Himself, He must also tell us about ourselves. The Maker will always have a more comprehensive understanding of the made than the made does of itself. You cannot discover how to be fully, wondrously, wholly human on your own. It's a subject far too difficult for any one person or family or culture or era to master on its own; we need a tutor who knows better than we do, and that tutor is Jesus.



Hebrews 12.2 calls Jesus both the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith: we are at our best when we are simply following in His footsteps, assured that the outcome is worth the journey. The apostle Paul declares Jesus to be no less than a new Adam in the second half of Romans 5, no less than the place from which the whole human project will begin again, both the blueprint and the destination. This is part of what St. Athanasius, one of the great theologians from the 300s CE, meant when he proclaimed: “He (God) became what we are so we might become like He is.”

Can we be surprised by the character of God revealed in the miracle of Christmas called the incarnation?

So often our discussions about God and His character start with what we might label theological abstractions - God is omnipotent, God is omnipresent, God is omniscient, and the like. Cynthia Rigby, who teaches theology at Austin Seminary (one of our PCUSA schools) warns that instead of starting with those esoteric notions, we should instead start where the New Testament itself tell us to start - with Jesus of Nazareth, whose story started at Christmas.

Magisterial texts like Philippians 2.5-8 would tell us that adjectives like lowly, humble, and self-giving should start our list of descriptive words about God. Philip Yancey, in the chapter on Jesus' birth in his great book about Jesus, "The Jesus I Never Knew," writes that Christmas tells us that terminology like "courageous," "vulnerable," and "an underdog born among underdogs" should also make our definition of who God is and what He's like.

Reflecting this sensibility, Anglican bishop David Jenkins described his own theology with these three simple lines: "God is. God is as God is in Jesus Christ. So there is hope."

And, last, can we be surprised by how wondrous yet mysterious God is?

As human beings, we have dual instincts - we want to remove mystery from the world, much of how our species has thrived can be explained as that, yet we also deep within yearn for mystery too.

This is especially important when it comes to God - the first desire often tries whittle down to size that which cannot be grasped.

Christmas, like Easter, confronts us with the majestic incomprehensibility of our God. How can God take on the limitations of human flesh? How can divinity and humanity exist in the same person? How can God be everywhere but also a very specific somewhere? How can the most relevant human that's ever lived and the clearest revelation of God that's ever been given be the same person? And how can that person, who lived what we'd certainly label a short life of 30-40 years some 20 centuries ago, remain so compelling?

And it is a good, in fact a very good, thing that we can scarcely conceive of the wonder of who God is and how He is to His core. As well-known Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber writes, "I can't imagine that the God of the universe is limited to our ideas of God...In a way, I need a God who is bigger and more nimble and more mysterious than what I could understand or contrive. Otherwise, it can feel like I'm worshiping nothing more than my own ability to comprehend the divine."

And this is probably a good place to stop - with worship. Worship requires awe, and from that awe springs reverence. What we think we understand about God should induce this worship response deep within us; so should what we know we don't know about Him. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says it this way: "The closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty, and the more you will find worship welling up within you...When we begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. Not to have that reaction is a fairly sure sign that we haven't yet really understood who he is or what he's done."

This Advent and Christmas season, may we all be surprised by God, maybe most of all by who God is, and how much better and greater He is than we can possibly conceive.