

A Surprising Christmas (Week 2) - A Surprising Message **Sermon Summary**

Can we be surprised anew by the message and meaning of Christmas?

For Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the end of her magnificent Magnificat (Luke 1.54-55), it is not political power, technological innovation, human evolution, nor even history itself that undergirds the passing of one century into the next. Instead, it is God's unfailing promises, once made never to be unmade. They are the steering wheel that guides time forward; they pull the past and present toward God's future. For generations, Israel had waited, sometimes during seasons of plenty, often during periods of great suffering and spiritual unfaithfulness. But still they waited, passing down word of God's commitments like a priceless family heirloom.



And the goals of these kept promises birthed in the person of Jesus are described elsewhere in Luke's Advent and Christmas stories as follows:

- Jesus would be a Savior and Lord to rival that other so-called Savior and Lord in Rome, bringing an altogether different and better kind of "good news" to the world (Lk. 2.10-11)
- Jesus would be the "savior" of the world, according to Simeon the prophet, which just means that He will heal it from the many ailments with which it is afflicted and in so doing save its very life (Lk. 2.30-32).
- Anna, the 84 year old prophetess, says that Jesus is no less than God's "redemption" (Lk. 2.38), a word co-opted by Christians from the slave markets, a word signifying the act of buying a slave's freedom, a price they themselves could not meet.

Thus, first, can we be surprised by the message of Christmas that, left alone, the world is sick, trapped, and lost. But thanks be to our promise-keeping God who did leave us alone.

In her Magnificat, Mary also makes clear that God in Jesus' coming will "scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." (Lk. 1.54-55). This is not God turning the world upside down, but turning it right side up.

The late Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, reflected on this text as follows: "No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf will have that Someone. That Someone is God, Emmanuel, God with us. Without poverty of spirit, there can be no abundance of God."

So, second, can we be surprised that only the humble and hungry can truly receive the intended blessings of Christmas? What will it be for us - to be numbered among the lowly on the inside of Christmas, or among the proud perpetually on the outside of it?

If you think back to all the ways Luke's gospel in its first two chapters describe the purposes of Christ's coming - to redeem, to save and heal, to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things, to lead and champion an alternative Kingdom to the kingdoms of the world - you might think to yourself, "That sounds an awful lot like what we as a church should be all about, and what we ought to be doing in the world?" And you'd be right.

John's gospel, of the four, makes the connection most explicitly: after Easter, Jesus commissions His disciples in the following way, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (John 20.21).

The coming of Jesus from God is not only a miracle to be celebrated, but a pattern to be followed. As Jesus came and did, so we go and do in His name. As Jesus came and spoke the truth, so we go and live His truth and speak His truth. As He came and loved, so we go and love, following His new, great commandment. He who came as one person in one place at one time now lives on in a million people in a million places at a million times.

So third and last, we ask - can we be surprised that the whys of Christ's coming at Christmas are now the mission of His followers?

The Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, expands on this idea of the church continuing the mission of Jesus which started at Christmas this way: "When we love others, we are continuing Jesus' mission, for He is the Great Lover of all. When we develop and use the particular gifts God has given to each of us to make the world beautiful for others, we are continuing His mission. When we put the needs of others before our own needs, we are continuing His mission to make love the chief motivation of life. When we say "No!" to pride and greed, and "Yes" to caring for all who are hurting, we are continuing His mission. When we make time to be kind to those whom our society overlooks - the downtrodden, the socially unacceptable, the awkward, the destitute, the uncool - we are continuing His mission. When we choose to respond patiently and graciously when angered, we are continuing His mission. And when we realize that we are not the center of the universe and that Jesus alone is the Center, our center, and everyone's center, we are continuing His mission."