

## Salvation by Surprise

I don't have a main Scripture reading this morning; instead, I'll be reflecting on the lyrics of one of our beloved Christmas carols, and will weave a few Scripture passages in along the way.

I love Christmas, and everything about it—the lights, the gifts, the family celebrations, the food! But if there is one thing I struggle with, it's that we have so sentimentalized Christmas. When we think of Christmas, we typically think of something like a Norman Rockwell painting, sleds being pulled by horses in a snowy countryside, or a house with a fire in the fireplace and colorful lights and decorations, gifts under the tree and everyone getting along sweetly. You get the picture.

The *true* picture of Christmas from the Bible, though, is one of poverty, the stink of animals, political unrest and upheaval, religious controversy, and the darkness of violence. And, of course, incredibly good news in the midst of all that.

And while most years we might hear this and think, "I didn't come to church (or dial up church) to hear that Christmas is messy and dark and all that," this year, I wonder if the true context and message of the first Christmas might ring truer for us, and hit home a bit more clearly because of the messiness of our

world these days. Jesus wasn't born into a Camelot type of world, and we aren't exactly living in a Camelot type of world either right now.

Just take a moment and think back on this past year... from the national and international, to the personal and interpersonal. And, the present time and the maelstrom of our world right now. How does God speak into, and enter into, this time? This world? Your life? Your neighbors lives? Your family members' lives? How does God speak into unemployment? Into division? Into racial equality? Into sickness? Into poverty and homelessness?

The same way God spoke into all of that a couple thousand years ago! And with that in mind, I'd like to use as our text for reflection this morning the 4 verses of the beloved Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem. It was written in 1868 by an Episcopal pastor, Phillips Brooks, who wrote it for the children of his church to teach them the Christmas story. It's brilliant, and Biblical, and each verse reminds us that God came to earth in ways that were unexpected, but needed, at the right time, into a weary and conflicted world. As I mentioned earlier, I'll weave in a few Scriptures along the way.

What I love about this carol, is that it reminds us that God is full of surprises, and of the unexpected.

1. *O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee (speaking of Bethlehem!) tonight.*

The first verse tells us that the savior of the world is born in an unexpected place—Bethlehem. That’s a surprise. According to the expectations at that time, the Messiah was supposed to come from a loftier and more central religious center, like Jerusalem. Instead, it was Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, at that time, was not exactly a booming metropolis, or even a place where someone would stay for an extended visit. It was more like a truck stop out in the middle of nowhere; a place people went *through* on the way to somewhere else. In fact, it was so insignificant it wasn’t even on cartographers’ maps at that time. That’s how small and insignificant it was.

The prophet Micah acknowledges this: “But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are least among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel.” And in spite of this prophetic word, the people still expected the savior to come from Jerusalem, their religious and political capitol. The seat of power, and religious authority.

But because Jesus was born in *Bethlehem*, it reminds us that God, through Jesus Christ, has no interest in claiming worldly power—or even religious authority or power. He arrived on the margins, and remained largely on the margins during his life, to meet people right where they are in the messiness of life. An unexpected location.

So Jesus comes to earth in an unexpected place. That's one of the things I love about God's ways that are recorded in Scripture. He's always popping up in unexpected places: a burning bush, a donkey, a gardener by the empty tomb, a traveler on the road to Emmaus.

People expected the messiah to be born in a Jerusalem mansion, with midwives, and in great comfort. But here he is, in an animal barn in Bethlehem—the outskirts of the outskirts. The point: God doesn't always appear in the expected place, with great fanfare. He appears quietly, in surprising, unexpected places—the Bethlehems of our lives and the world. And assures us that, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in...” that place. The quiet out of the way place. The unexpected place.

Where do you expect to meet Jesus? Are you open to the possibility that he might appear where you least expect? Perhaps in a dark place (“yet in thy dark

streets shineth the everlasting light...”) As we are apart for the holidays this year, it provides an opportunity to meet Jesus in an unexpected place.

*2. For Christ is born of Mary and, gathered all above, while mortals sleep,  
the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars,  
together proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and  
peace to all on earth!*

Here is the second surprise: an unexpected *person* to bear the savior: Mary, the poor peasant girl. The Messiah was supposed to come from nobility, from a family line with strong pedigree.

God wasn't looking for importance, though, but for willingness. Mary's qualifications were her humility, her trust, and a willingness to be used by God.

So, God doesn't always use the person—or the *kind* of person—we expect to accomplish his will. He sometimes chooses unexpected people—like you and me; that's good news. We're meant to relate to Mary. She's one of us. Like many of the other people in the Bible whom God called to be part of his redemptive work in the world. Some said, "I'm too young." Some said "I'm too old." Some said "I'm too sinful." And God said, "So, what's your point? You are just who I need!"

And these are not whitewashed perfect saints, but people with hang-ups and problems and quirky personalities. Like us. People with a wide variety of backgrounds; even sketchy ones.

Even Jesus' family background was sketchy. If you read his genealogy as recorded in Matthew 1, you will see that Jesus' family tree was full of colorful characters and miscreants. And foreigners, like Ruth. Jesus had foreign blood in him! His family tree was as diverse and strange as mine, and yours. This is no elite pedigree. Jesus is a real human being with the same weird family history that you and I have. That isn't what the people expected. But isn't that refreshing?!? All kinds of people are welcome into God's family, and God uses all kinds of people to accomplish his will. Even the rascals of the world.

Getting back to Mary... again, what God saw in her was willingness. Where are you on the willingness scale? If God showed up unexpectedly and asked you to participate in something that sounded crazy and improbable to you, what would you think? How would you respond?

*3. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming,*

*but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear  
Christ enters in.*

Here is our third surprise. The creator of the universe, the Redeemer, shows up quietly, and without fanfare. Silently. It's why we love, and sing, Silent Night.

We tend to think of the Christmas story as *headlines*—a big main event that takes center stage—because we know the story so well, and have heard it so often, and because it's part of the décor at this time of year in many homes. It's become a center stage production. So it's easy to forget that none of what happened made any kind of headlines or was witnessed by, or heard of by, more than a small handful of people, on the margins.

If there *was* a newspaper, say, the Jerusalem times, or Palestine press, the headlines would have been about Caesar's attempts to expand the Roman Empire, or King Herod building yet another luxury mansion on the Mediterranean coast, or the invention of another amazing feat of engineering (aqueducts that can make water travel uphill; how did the Romans do that?!).

This is what Luke is doing when he tells us about Emperor Augustus issuing a decree, and Quirinius being the governor of Syria. These are the headline-

makers that Luke tells us about as he puts the Christmas story in its historical context.

Luke is saying that, while the headline-makers are doing their thing, an angel appears to Mary in the quietness of a private moment, and then went and spoke to Joseph in a dream while he's sleeping. Then, the holy family quietly travels to Bethlehem and a baby is born in a stable. Then shepherds are out in a field... and then magi see a star and begin to follow it across the solitary desert.

These are not headline events. They took place on the margins, quietly.

God's desire is not to create a big splash as he works in the world, or in *our* lives either. We often crave headlines or big-event personal experiences, because that's what we've been conditioned to want. But in our hunger—or our distraction—we easily miss the small and silent out of the way appearances and movements of God in our lives, and in the world—on the margins. Or, as one of my mentors used to say, “on the fuzzy edges.” Look for God on the fuzzy edges; that's where God often shows up.

*“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”* Philipps Brooks got it right. Although, practically speaking, it couldn't have been a completely silent night—angels singing in the fields would've been less than quiet; and a woman

giving birth, well... Not to mention a baby crying. The main point is, it took place on the margins, away from things, in relative silence from the noise of the seemingly more important things happening at that time.

*“No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”* He was onto something there.

Because it does require a kind of humility to step away—even if momentarily—from the hustle and bustle and shiny objects and noise of the big events and headlines and experiences, to pay attention to the silent ways that God shows up in our lives, and in our neighborhoods, where God silently slips in to bring some light, some peace, some healing, some reconciliation, some moment of refreshment and joy.

Can we pause long enough to see? To hear? To reflect, so we can put some smaller puzzle pieces together to help us see a bigger picture? That seems like a tall order these days because the headline events are screaming for our attention. But it is possible! And, I believe, necessary. Because God is present to each of us, always, gently working to bring us to an awareness that we are loved unconditionally, and that gifts of grace are waiting for us, sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious, and always for our benefit.

4. *O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*

Here is the final surprise: an unexpected way of salvation. Salvation comes by surprise, by the personal and transformational love of God abiding with us, entering into human hearts. It doesn't come in the way or manner that people expected and wanted—by politics, power, religious authority, or more external rules to follow. I'm getting ahead of the story here because that has more to do with the life and ministry and death of Christ than his birth, but this is *foreshadowed* in his birth: Jesus was not born into a seat of power. And, he would not fulfill the expectations of the people as "President Jesus."

For a moment, put yourself in the shoes (sandals) of a person living around that time. Your promised land is being occupied by a powerful and cruel Roman army. There is military presence on every street corner. You are paying exorbitant taxes, very little of which you get to see put to work for *you*. You can get taken advantage of at a moment's notice and put to work by your Roman occupiers. Your personal property can be confiscated with no recourse for getting it back. You see friends, family members and strangers, brutally beaten and

sometimes executed in a very public manner—just to make an example for everyone to see, so the peace is kept and no one tries to revolt or undermine Roman authority. And on it goes. Can you kind of feel what they felt?

Now, if you are living in that kind of world, what kind of savior do you want or expect? You want a superhero who is going to rescue you from all of that. Their messiah was expected to be powerful, politically and militarily—one who would bring judgment and overthrow the evil oppressors. Isn't that what you would want? I would. The people were hungry for a revolution, which makes sense of why—during Holy Week—they wanted Barabbas released instead of Jesus when Pontius Pilate offered to free one political prisoner to appease the crowd. Barabbas wanted to topple the empire. Jesus was just a weak failure in their eyes.

John the Baptist reveals the hopes and expectations of the people. Listen to what he says (Luke 3): *“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* What does John expect? John expects Rambo Jesus. The

terminator savior. Who brings judgment! Power to destroy enemies! That's why John the Baptist was so popular: he preached fire and brimstone against the evildoers. That's what the people wanted, and hoped for.

But after Jesus begins his ministry and John sees him healing the sick, forgiving sinners, and choosing a path of humility, John the Baptist—who is now in prison—calls his disciples to him and asks them to send a message to Jesus. Here is what it says (from Luke 7:18): *“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”* John is disappointed in Jesus. You can almost hear the disappointment in his voice. Jesus was not what he expected in the Messiah.

And we read in the first chapter of the book of Acts that even after Jesus' resurrection, just as he's about to ascend, the disciples ask him this question: “Are you *now* going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” That's a political question! “Now are you going to run for president?” “Now that you're done telling stories and healing people, and done with that going to the cross and dying thing; now that you've gotten that out of your system, *now* are you going to topple the Roman empire and make Israel a great nation again, like king David did?” Jesus

dismisses the question and says, “You want power? I’ll give you power. You will have power to be my witnesses when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” **Jesus redefines power!**

It’s not political or military power that will bring true peace and salvation, and usher in the Kingdom of God. But spiritual, transformative power. The power of love, which levels the playing field and creates peace. As was foretold in Zechariah 4:6: “Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.”

What do you hope for in our Savior? What are your expectations about the way in which Jesus saves, and leads, and works, in your life and in the world?

Jesus didn’t come to throw people out: to eradicate the world of evil people by force, or to cast out sinners from God’s sight and take a seat of power. He came to heal every human heart.

Alexandyr Solzhenitsyn (nobel prize winning author; survivor of the Russian gulags): *“the line between good and evil is not drawn between us and them, between nations or parties. The line between good and evil runs down the center of every human heart.”*

Jesus came to heal human hearts, to forgive and reconcile, and to bring people back to God and do so by laying down his life. It's not what was expected. He told stories, he hung out with the riff raff, and he was— in the words of Henri Nouwen—the wounded healer.

All of this is good news for us. God meets us anywhere and everywhere. We don't have to earn his love or approval, nor do we have to go find him and then crawl on our hands and knees to beg his forgiveness. He comes to us—“*O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*” He meets us in the difficult and dark places of our lives, and in the most unexpected ways. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear, at the coming of Christ.

Now, let's sing this carol and give thanks to God for the surprising and unexpected ways that his gift of Love comes to us.