Christmas Eve 1972
GOD'S SURPRISES! (Communion)

There are some surprising and unexpected things about Christmas! Here are some of them!

Mary, the mother of Jesus is a nobody; she comes from Galilee and is engaged to a carpenter. When she receives the announcement of her pregnancy, she is afraid. Joseph wants to break the engagement. Mary's son is born in a stable, and Mary isn't yet married. His birth is reported to the King, Herod, by foreigners. The story almost borders on comedy.

Are Luke and Matthew unaware of the humor and absurdity of their story? Jesus' birth is explainable only as the strange and surprising work of God, who plays tricks on the trusting Joseph as well as the cunning King Herod. God acts in an unexpected way. His promise will be fulfilled not according to human calculations.

The surprise of Christmas is expressed in one sentence in the Christmas story by Luke. "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the in." The surprise of God in an ordinary event!

Think of it! The coming of God in the flesh was no great event as far as the world knew. Two young people, Mary and Joseph, journey to Bethlehem. They are merely two among many making their way along the road. There is nothing outwardly special about them at all.

Martin Luther wrote of the first Christmas: "How unobtrus-ively and simply do those events take place on earth that are so heralded in heaven. No one regarded this young woman bringing forth her first-born. No one noticed that in a strange place she had not the very least thing needful in childbirth. There she was without preparation: no light, no fire, in the dead of night, in thick darkness. No one came to give the customary assistance... think women, there was no one there to bathe the baby. No warm water, nor even cold. The mother herself was midwife and maid. The cold manger was the bed and the bathtub. Who showed the poor girl what to do? She had never had a baby before. I am amazed that the little one did not freeze!"

A miracle in a common event! God's surprise! We can imagine at the same time what the crowd might have been doing in the inn which had refused Mary and Joseph. Per- haps it was filled with important people, maybe even some of the officials of the Roman Empire and others in position of power and authority.

We can further imagine that in the inn such people would be talking about what they considered to be some of the great and important events of their time. Maybe they were discussing the glorious future of the Roman Empire, or the future of the world under Roman Rule; talking as if the future were to be determined by the plans and ideas of people alone. Undoubtedly, some were saying and thinking, "Rome will last forever."

And while this was going on, while people made plans and thought they were dealing with the eternal issues, God surprised the world in the birth of a newborn baby, born in a stable behind the inn where the so-ca11ed people of importance were debating the future of the world.

And who got the first news of God's surprise? Not the wise of the world, or the rulers, or the people of position, or L the people of power, or the so-called religious people. They wouldn't have looked for God in a stable, for God in the midst of common people. Only a few at first were let in on the surprise. The simple, faithful shepherds up in the hills came down into the valley.

But the world at large saw nothing unusual that night; it saw nothing out of the ordinary. The party continued in the inn. People kept on playing God. We can even imagine that some servant in the inn heard of the baby who had been born in the stable among the cattle and perhaps the people of importance even laughed and joked about the poor people whose baby had been born in a stable.

As far as the world was concerned, only another baby's cry was added to humanity. All in all, we really don't know too much more about God's surprise to the world that night. The shepherds may have forgotten about the event after a while; and after all who would believe such a story anyway?

The record of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection following the Christmas event, contains more of God's surprises. Jesus teaches that God has sided with the oppressed of the world and will redeem the world by means of the lowly.

While still a young man, Jesus is crucified as a common criminal between two thieves and buried in a borrowed tomb. It is with such events and persons that God chooses to transform and save his world.

And yet we shouldn't be surprised by God's surprises. If there is any consistent mark of God's activity throughout the Bible, it is that it defies human calculation and expectation. To be sure God is steadfast in his love and mercy — but his actions on behalf of the world often shatter human expectations.

Christmas says to us that God often works, not in the spectacular or the sensational or in the famous; rather God works quietly, faithful., in commonplace events and in the lives of persons and events where we might least expect to find God working.

The event of Christmas reminds us of the unpredictable possibilities that may be hidden in the most unpromising circumstances.

Think of it! The birth of the Messiah was an event which for ages people had looked forward to with expectancy. But what did they find? A common ordinary baby, as far as their eyes could see, no different from any other Hebrew child.

And what did people find some years later? A man living a godly life and teaching and living God's love, spending most of his time with the outcasts and oppressed. We may often miss God's surprises, because they come in such ordinary wrapping, or because they are not what we expect. More often than not, as history shows, events which have seemed too trivial or unimportant to be mentioned have been loaded with world-shaking possibilities of which we never dreamed. Such are the surprises of God!

The Apostle Paul wrote — "God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise; he has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong. He has chosen things of little

repute and strength, yes, and even things which have no real existence to explode the pretensions of the things that are.” 4.

And so tonight the celebration of the simple, ordinary birth of Christ the Lord of History, reminds us that we may be woefully mislead if we evaluate life or God’s activities by their size, noise, and pomp. God’s promises are fulfilled, but not always according to our human calculations.

Tonight, to further celebrate God’s surprises, we are going to join together in the sacrament of holy communion. Jesus took common materials, bread and wine, and in this activity, dramatized God’s actions. And so, the church down through the centuries has gathered about the Lord’s table, knowing that Christ is still present with us with power.

Who knows on this night, on this silent night, where God’s surprises might be working silently and undetected by many of us? God calls us to be open to his surprises this Christmas eve and all through the year. Amen.