Sunday, December 20, 1987
SURPRISE (No. 3 in a Series: Advent Verbs)
Luke 1:26-38

Although the verb “surprise” does not appear in the story of the announcement to Mary that she is going to be the mother of a very special baby, no one is more surprised than Mary. The elements of surprise are woven throughout the Advent and Christmas story, and on through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

First, let’s look at Mary’s surprise. In some ways, Mary is similar to several women in the Old Testament, specifically Sarah and Hannah, who give birth to children through the intervention of God. Each child is seen as another blessing from God, who fulfills promises, and both women are surprised by the unexpected grace of God. Sarah, in the Old Testament, laughs at the announcement that she will give birth. Hannah weeps year after year in longing for a child and will not be comforted by her husband’s declaration that she is worth ten children. Both Sarah and Hannah are considered to be beyond childbearing age and have given up all hope of ever having a child. But God surprises them and their husbands.

And there is Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, in the New Testament, the mother of John the Baptist. She too is considered beyond childbearing age, but finds herself pregnant and is surprised. Her husband is so surprised that he is speechless.

However, there are some striking differences between Mary and these three women, Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. They are all wives of notable men, but Mary is a nobody. Furthermore, she is not even married and is a young woman. But again, the essential theme is surprise. God acts in an unexpected way. God’s promises will be fulfilled but not according to human calculations.

Mary receives the announcement of her pregnancy and is surprised and afraid. Joseph, her fiancé, wants to break the engagement. Mary’s son is born in a stable. His advent is reported to Herod by foreigners who tell of seeing a new star in the sky. The story borders on comedy, as if God is making fun of human wisdom and power.

God’s surprises continue. For the early church, the question was: How can Jesus be the Christ if God allowed him to be crucified? The only possible answer shatters human expectations regarding the world’s savior and human wisdom regarding God. God in an illegitimate baby? SURPRISE! God in a stable? SURPRISE! God on a cross? SURPRISE!

Think of it! The coming of God in a human being was no great event as far as the world knew. Two young people, Mary and Joseph, travel 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 unobtrusively and simply do those events take place on earth that are so heralded in heaven. No one regarded this young woman bringing forth her firstborn. 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. There was no one there to bathe the baby. No warm water, nor even cold.” Luther could very well have added that it must have been a rather messy affair.

Being human can be exceedingly messy. While it is the most noble human experience, birth is also one of the untidiest. Rhythmically discomforting contractions, pain, panting, placenta, sweating, blood, mucus, labor. Do you think we sometimes try to make the manger scene too sterile and clean? Or Christmas too pure? Maybe our dreaming of a white Christmas means more than wishing for snow.

A passage in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, “Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story” (Harper 1958) reveals clean Christmas’s more extreme implications. In December 1955, the first month of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, the mayor had called a meeting which included King and other officials of the Montgomery Improvement Association, a few prominent white pastors, and representatives from the bus line. After King and others had eloquently argued their position, a white segregationist Methodist pastor responded. King recalled his speech:

“He made it clear that he felt the Negroes were wrong in boycotting the buses; and the even greater wrong, he contended, lay in the fact that the protest was being led by ministers of the gospel. The job of the minister, he maintained, is to lead the souls of men to God, not bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems. He moved on to a brief discussion of the Christmas story. In evocative terms, he talked of ‘God’s unspeakable gift.’ He ended by saying as we moved into the Christmas season, our minds and hearts should be turned toward the Babe of Bethlehem; and he urged the Negro ministers to leave the meeting determined to bring this boycott to a close and lead their people instead ‘to a glorious experience of the Christian faith.'”

Following up the urging, the town leaders encouraged the blacks to give up the boycott until after Christmas: The action was going to mess up the season of good cheer. Apparently, it was not only supposed to be a clean Christmas, but a “white” Christmas also.

But the surprise of Christmas is precisely that God enters our messy world of human affairs. God loves us enough to enter our lack of order, our humanity, and our untidy human affairs. Not only does God enter our messed-up world, but the further surprise of Christmas is that God intervenes and identifies with those who hurt. This past week, our family received a Christmas card from one of our relatives, and she wrote that she and her husband were having some problems and were separated. Then she added, “I’m not sure how it’s all going to end up, but I am refusing to let it stop me from celebrating Christmas. I figured Jesus came for everyone, not just happily married couples, right?”

The songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, as recorded by Luke and which surround the Christmas story, make it clear that God’s action is the upheaval of the social order and the transformation of the world. Christmas is not meant to gloss over the problems of the world or of individuals.

Listen to some of the prophetic words of Mary as she ponders God’s actions in the coming birth of her baby: “God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent away empty.” Surprise! God sides with the oppressed and will redeem the world by means of the lowly. When he became an adult, Jesus said that over and over again in his teachings.

Surprise! The first shall be last and the last first!

Surprise! Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Surprise! Whoever would be great among you must become the servant of all.

Surprise! As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

Surprise! Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Surprise! Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

God's surprises! We can imagine at the same time what the crowd might have been doing in the inn that had no room for Mary and Joseph. Perhaps it was filled with important people, maybe even some of the officials of the Roman Empire and others in positions 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 issues of their time. Maybe they were discussing the glorious future of the Roman Empire. Who was going to be the next Emperor? They were 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 who got the first news of God's surprise? Not the wise of the world, or the rulers, or the people of status, or the people of power, or the priests and rulers of the temple. They wouldn't have looked for God in a baby in the manger. Only a few at first were let in on the surprise. The shepherds were notified and came to see the baby.

But the world at large experienced nothing unusual that night. It saw nothing out of the ordinary. The party continued at the inn. People kept on playing god. We can even imagine that someone 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 to be 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 much more about God's surprise to the world that night. The shepherds may have forgotten about the event after a while; and who would believe such a story anyway?

The surprise of Christmas reminds us that God often works, not in the spectacular or the sensational or in the famous; rather, God works quietly, faithfully, in commonplace events and in the lives of people where we might least expect to find God.

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

The Apostle Paul wrote: "God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise; God has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong. God has chosen things of little repute and strength, yes, and even things which seem to have no real existence to explode the pretensions of the things that are."

Who knows during this Advent and Christmas season where God's surprises might be working silently and undetected? Perhaps even in you and in me. Amen.