Sunday, December 18, 1994
SURPRISE (3RD IN A SERIES: VERBS FOR ADVENT)
Luke 1:39-45

Although the verb “surprise” does not appear in any of the Advent or Christmas stories in the New Testament, the stories are filled with surprises. Who could be more surprised than Elizabeth and Zechariah when they learn Elizabeth is going to have a baby? Zechariah is so surprised that he is speechless and remains so until the child is born.

Who could be more surprised than Mary and Joseph upon learning that Mary is pregnant and will have a child? The elements of surprise are woven all through the Advent and Christmas stories and continue through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

First, let’s look at Elizabeth’s and Mary’s surprise. In many ways, Elizabeth and Mary are similar to several women in the Old Testament, specifically Sarah and Hannah, who also give birth through the intervention of God. Both of their children, Isaac and Samuel, are seen as blessings from God, who fulfills promises, yet both women are surprised by the unexpected grace of God.

Sarah, in the Old Testament story, is so surprised that she laughs at the announcement that she will give birth so late in life. Hannah has been weeping year after year in longing for a child and is not even comforted by her husband’s declaration that she is worth ten children. Both Sarah and Hannah are considered beyond childbearing age and have given up all hope of ever having a child. But God surprises them and their husbands.

However, there are some striking differences between Mary and the other three women, Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. These three are all part of notable families, but Mary is a nobody. In addition, the other three are all considered beyond childbearing age and have been married for years. Mary is a young woman and not yet married. But again, the essential theme is surprise. God acts in unexpected, unpredictable ways. God’s promises will be fulfilled but not according to human calculations.

When Mary receives the announcement that she will bear a child, she is both afraid and surprised. Joseph, her fiancé, wants to break the engagement, but in a dream is told by God to go ahead with the marriage. Mary’s son is born in a stable. His birth is reported to Herod the King 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.

When you stop to think about it, it was not a very good time for Mary to have a baby. The Hebrews, as a people and as a nation, were about on their last legs. Things had been going from bad to worse for several generations. Now they were completely under the rule of Rome. There was a spirit of discontent among the people; they were restless, and they rubbed one another the wrong way. Even the temple was not what it used to be.

So a young prospective single mother might well have thought to herself, “It’s not a very good time for this surprise to happen to me about having a baby.”

The fact of the matter is, of course, that there is never a completely good time to have a baby. The world is never just the right kind of world that you would like to bring a child into. In fact, there is never exactly the right time to do anything good and great.

It is never the right time to start a new project, to build a new church, to get married, or to start a family. It is never exactly the right time to turn over a new leaf, to break a bad habit, or to take on a new responsibility.

But Mary accepted God's surprise and went right ahead and had the baby anyway. That's what you do when you want to follow the will of God.

What God's surprises tell us is this: it is not the times, it is you that counts. There are a great many people today making a considerable struggle and effort to live a decent life, and it is not easy. There are so many influences that weaken the foundation of our lives, that invite us to live on lower levels. We are tempted, all of us, I think, at times, to say to ourselves, at least if we do not say it to other people, "What's the use?" But then we remember God's surprises and the promises that go with them — that in spite of all the threats to civilization and to the life we know, life goes magnificently and irresistibly on. To be sure, the times are never quite right, but it's not the times, it's the person that counts.

The other surprise of the Christmas event is this: when life looks as though it were about to break down, it is most likely to bring forth something new and wonderful. For there is always to be found somewhere some obedient, yielding servant of God who brings forth new life, wraps it in swaddling cloths, and lays it tenderly in a manger. 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 manger? Surprise! God on a cross? Surprise!

Another surprise — the coming of God in a human being was no great event as far as the world knew. Two 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 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. There was no one there to bathe the baby. No warm water, nor even cold."

God's surprises most frequently enter our world and our personal lives in quiet, unobtrusive ways. Connected to this surprise is the good news that God intervenes and identifies with those who hurt and suffer.

I remember a Christmas card we received a few years back from one of my nieces. 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 believe that Jesus came for everyone, not only happily married couples, right?"

The response to the surprise of Christmas by Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and others makes it clear that God's action is for everyone. The surprise of Christmas is not meant to gloss over the problems of the world or of individuals.

In addition, Christmas tells us that God's ways are not our ways. 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 empty away."

Surprise! God joins with the oppressed of the world and is redeeming the world by means of the lowly. In the teachings of Jesus, we see over and over again what surprises God's actions contain.

"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 unto me."

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

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

God's surprises! In my imagination, I like to speculate what some of the people in the inn in Bethlehem were talking about the night Jesus was born, and what they considered to be the most crucial issues of the time. Maybe they were discussing the glorious future of the Roman Empire or 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 thinking and saying, "Rome will last forever."

And who received 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 a manger anyway. Only a few at first were let in on the surprise. The shepherds were told 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 in 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 couple 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 Advent and Christmas tells 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 at work.

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

Later, 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 me. Amen.