

“Surprised, but not Surprised”

By Amy Valdez Barker

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25, NIV

Theme: God’s creative responses to the world’s needs continue to surprise us.

I am one of those people who is hard to surprise. I love throwing surprise parties for other people, but it is inevitable that if you try to reciprocate, I will more than likely find out. I think it’s because of my keen sense of people’s actions, reactions, and patterns of behavior. But, if I were being honest about myself, it’s because I’m super nosy and I want to know what’s going on all around me all the time. Some might call it OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), I would like to call it curiosity and wonder. Others might say it’s FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and I would say that it’s a desire to be included, but at the end of the day, it’s likely just me being a human.

When God wove us in our mother’s wombs, God knew all about the human strengths and frailties that have shown up over and over again since the beginning of time. No matter what community, culture, or generation you come from, we encounter humans that fall short. There is one exception in our history and in our experience that is connected to a story that changed the trajectory of our understanding of relationships between the Divine and the human. It’s a story that many who call themselves “Christians” are very familiar with and those who find themselves “Christian-adjacent” also know the story about a young woman who gave birth to God.

Why is this story surprising, but not surprising to many of us who read the Bible with a 21st-century lens? It’s important to find the wisdom that comes through the text

over and over again, in both the familiar and the mundane as well as the mysterious and surprising witness of God's grace. Many of us will be dissecting the text over the next few weeks. We'll look at it from the lens of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. We'll evaluate it in the lightness and in the darkness of humanity past, present, and future. We will do our best to bridge God's wisdom from the scriptures to address the travesties of our day. However, our own souls may be struggling with discovering the hope that the people may need to hear from the story of the Divine incarnation in our world.

Where is our Hope?

How can preachers give a good word of hope in the midst of the turmoil that many nations face? How can we give a message of hope when our children are anxious about their future? How can we give a message of hope when we are facing winners and losers in this country after a tumultuous election season? How can we give a message of hope when loneliness plagues our young adults? How can we give a message of hope when the beloved "church," the beloved Body of Christ, has found more and more ways to divide rather than unite? How can we give a message of hope when year after year, nation is rising up against nation? How can we give a message of hope when we as preachers can't stand in the fray without being beaten, dragged by the system, and cut in half, like the prophet Isaiah, by the people who were supposed to love them and protect them the most?

Where oh where are you God? Why does your Spirit feel so far away?

"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water."

Psalms 63:1

When preachers, teachers, and ministry leaders encounter the biblical text, it's easy to see the connections of the frailties of humanity throughout time. We should not be surprised by the reality that in the United States alone, there has been a rise of depression, anxiety, and loneliness that is affecting our young adults and adults (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/505745/depression-rates-reach-new-highs.aspx>). We should not be surprised by the number of adolescents who are experiencing anxiety disorders at a rate much greater than in the past (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>). When we look at the number of nations fighting nations and the number of conflicts escalated by "political competitions, regional crises, *religious imperialism [added]*, and civil disputes" (<https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/>), we should not be surprised that the Bible gives us illustration after illustration of conflicts amongst the people that have resulted in war, violence, and bloodshed. We shouldn't be surprised. We haven't even gotten to the conflicts in religious institutions that have occurred throughout this past year. The United Methodist Church alone, which has historically been one of the largest

protestant denominations, had their General Conference this past May and the body acknowledged the release of more than 7,000+ churches (<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/disaffiliations-approved-by-annual-conferences>) choosing to leave the connection. This denomination is just another of many Protestant churches who have found themselves facing major divisions, losses, and re-creations of new systems of faith, seeking to be more faithful in their own unique ways.

How can we preach hope?

Maybe you will be the exception, but there are many of us who will struggle with the current cultural landscape where God has called us to preach, teach, and offer people a word of hope in this moment. We will look for ways to exegete the heck out of the passages that make the most sense to us, are perhaps more pleasant to wrestle with, and offer the path that is most accessible in our congregations during this season that is supposed to be filled with joy, peace, love, and hope! Because in reality, we don't want to stir the waters anymore than they have already been stirred at this particular juncture in our American history.

I would like to say that taking the path of least resistance for the average American Protestant preacher is surprising. Unfortunately, it is not surprising at all as we face the facts that many of us are conflict-adverse. We want to be peacekeepers who bring the good news of the biblical stories to help people feel good about life, about themselves, and about their neighbors. And this is the path of least resistance. We all know the stories of the prophets who challenged the powers and principalities of their time and place. We know how those prophets stood up against the injustices against humanity that were being easily written off as someone's privilege because of their status.

The text from the latter prophet Isaiah, where we often point during this season, speaks about the decline of Israel and the strengths of the Assyrian empire flexing its power to the weakening Israelites. Isaiah spoke out against the actions of the kings and was often found in contempt for the rulers of his day. He enjoyed the most influence under King Hezekiah of Judah during the third year of Hoshea, then serving as the king of Israel. In 2 Kings 18, we are reminded why Hezekiah was known to have been such a good king.

“Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him”

2 Kings 18:5-7.

However, King Hezekiah still didn't have it easy, leading a people in the time

of wars over territories, invasions over power, and people so divided that all seemed hopeless and many of the people felt abandoned by God. What good word could a prophet bring to a hopeless people? A tired king? A forgotten nation? Some of Hezekiah's most trusted advisors were pushing him to abandon hope of a distant god who left them to suffer when they heard the threats of the Assyrian King.

“Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, ‘Jerusalem will not be given into the hands of the king of Assyria.’ Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered?”

2 Kings 19:10-11

AND YET ...

The most unexpected activity happened in this world over 2000+ years ago. The God of all creation, distant, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, decided to come to humanity in the humblest of ways. Coming back to this passage in Matthew, we encounter a young couple who have the surprise of their lifetime. Their surprise is wrought with scandal, fear, potential alienation, and certain discrimination. As it was in the early first century, women and men were promised to one another in a two-part process. They were engaged, betrothed, promised, to one another in the first part of the relationship, often meant that two families would be united through this couple and a contract was agreed upon. However, she did not “belong” to the man until the second part, the wedding where she would legally be brought to the home of the groom. In the meantime, there was the explicit understanding that she would be untouched until her wedding day. This is where the scandal came in, as most Christians know in this story. Mary was already pregnant and all Joseph could think about was that she had betrayed him and his family. To let this news become public would be to disgrace both families and could bring harm to Mary and her unborn child. Therefore, we read in this passage, a story about Joseph, who decides to do his best to help everyone in the situation walk away with a little less pain than has already been caused.

I'm certain that Joseph felt very lonely in that situation. I bet he felt betrayed, hurt, and maybe even a little angry. This wasn't how things were supposed to go in his society during his time. He probably thought he had done all the right things, followed God faithfully the way you were supposed to in his day and age, and he lived as righteously as he could. To have this happen to Mary left him with all kinds of questions. Maybe he was too kind to ask her what happened. Maybe he just couldn't face her. Maybe he didn't have a community of friends who would not judge him for what happened to her. After all, there were men in his community that would do far worse if they found their betrothed in the same situation. Joseph likely found himself screaming out to God silently, “Where Oh Where are you God? Why me? Why did this have to happen to

me in this moment when my life is just about to begin?” His loneliness must have been overwhelming. Like Hezekiah, Joseph was searching for hope.

AND YET ...

The angel of the Lord came to him, just as the angel had come to Mary. The angel came to offer an explanation, a bit of reassurance, a glimmer of hope. He is told that the situation is not what he was thinking. The circumstances were not as perilous as he was imagining. Instead, he discovers that this is God’s work. There is a miracle taking place and he gets to be a part of it, if he wants to. For all his loneliness, he discovers that God had not abandoned him, rather God was patiently waiting for the right moment to open his eyes and his heart to the plans and the vision that God had for all of humanity. Even though this little surprise about Mary seemed overwhelming and out of the blue, the angel helped him discover that this is not as surprising as it seems. The God of all creation was weaving together the perfect moment for the embodiment of the Divine to arrive. And both Joseph and Mary were going to be the literal bearers of this good news. He would get to be a part of this incredible gift to the world.

We look backward over time to recognize the moments God has surprised us throughout history. And in our glancing to the past through the Old Testament and into the New Testament, we discover that *“there is nothing new under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes, 1:9). Hezekiah heard the prophecy from Isaiah about the chosen One who would change the course of history. Mary heard from the angel of the Lord that her child would change the course of history. Joseph heard from the angel of the Lord that the son he would raise from God would change the course of history. The signs were all around them, signs of God’s presence, God’s faithfulness, and God’s love were coursing through these moments in history, so they should not have been surprised when God showed up through an infant child to change the course of history.

We were surprised none-the-less.

PREACH THE SURPRISE!

As preachers, teachers, and the prophets in our communities today, we are invited to be pleasantly surprised by God’s gifts of grace that show up when we fine tune our attention to the Holy Spirit’s work. I find God sending glimmers of hope in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected moments. It comes through a neighbor who brings a gift of blueberries from their blueberry bush or when a toddler learns to walk. It comes with the smile of someone who appreciated your kindness or in the excitement of joy-filled and unexpected gift.

It is a beautiful gift to be surprised by God, even though we should have paid enough attention to not be surprised. The true gift is when we anticipate the surprises. We begin to notice the surprises of God in our everyday living. These small surprises turn out to be reminders of God’s presence with us. We can also hope for the big surprises that God can give our world like the surprise of peace amongst warring

nations, the surprise of food distribution for those who are starving, the surprise of security for people desperate to return to their home countries, and the surprise of unity in a divided country. These are the foundations of our faith, to be rooted in the faithfulness of our God who surprised the world with the gift of the incarnation, coming to us as an innocent child who changed the trajectory of the world.

Our task as preachers and prophets today is to bring hope by pointing to the constant, and sometimes surprising, presence of God in the midst of all the turmoil, tribulations, and frailties of humanity. God is still with us. God has walked with us in the past, through the footsteps of Jesus, the infant child, who was the Divine showing us how to love one another. God walks with us in the present, through the power of the Holy Spirit, showing up in each act of kindness, each moment of grace, each development of peace. God is there. And God walks ahead of us, preparing the way for our lives to be transformed so that we can join God in the new creation, painting a picture of the moments of God's joy that are yet to come. This is the good news that our world needs to hear. Our invitation as those bearers of good news is to preach into and through the surprises, as we pay attention to God's presence, and offer the witness of that presence available for everyone. Isn't that what this season is supposed to be about?