

ANGELIC MESSAGES FOR OUR TIME
“SURPRISE”
Luke 1:26-38

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Surprise, Surprise, life is full of surprises!

The Extreme Home Makeover crew drives up to someone's home and surprises them with a brand new house. Amy Grant surprises three people a week on TV by granting their wishes. A crazy youth pastor surprised his bride by having his dog be the ring bearer. To be surprised is to feel wonder, astonishment, amazement, at something unanticipated. To be surprised is to be dumfounded, even flabbergasted.

Once upon a time, Christmas was full of surprises. You never knew what presents to expect because there were limits to what Santa could afford. Our threshold of amazement then was much lower than it is today. Let not repetition ruin the reality. The story of Christmas is still amazing. The characters of Christmas are stunned and surprised by these angelic messengers that we have considered during this Advent season. O that we who gather for worship today could once more be captured by the wonder of it all!

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

MARY WAS SURPRISED BY JOY.

Joy to the world the Lord is come
Let all their songs employ!

Never mind that Gabriel's wings are shaking at the sight of Mary. Ignore the fact that Mary is greatly troubled and sorely afraid. Some news is so incredible, so astounding, so surprising that it makes you cry before you can laugh. Such was the case for Mary. She was surprised by joy.

Oswald Chambers said, "A life of intimacy with God is characterized by joy." The Bible says, "*The joy of the Lord is our strength.*" The angels proclaimed, "*Behold I bring you good news of great joy.*" Jesus said, "*I have told you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*"

Has life knocked the joy out of you this Christmas? Are you joyful today as you come to church?

C.S. Lewis described his conversion to Christianity as being "surprised by joy."

He wrote a whole book about it. Lewis was raised in a Christian home. But his intellectualism led him to atheism. Lewis, however, could never get comfortable with his disbelief. As he said, "I could not get away from Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet." Then in the Trinity term of 1929 he was brought kicking, struggling, eyes darting in every direction, back home to Christ. He was overwhelmed by joy.

What a difference that one man's conversion made to the twentieth century. C.S. Lewis gave us Mere Christianity, the finest argument for faith in the 20th century. C.S. Lewis gave us the Chronicles of Narnia, which people of all ages are flocking to the movie theaters to see this Christmas of 2005.

Joy is more than a seasonal greeting. It is a way of life. It is the glad potential of every Christian. May some angelic messenger greet you with joy this Christmas saying, "Rejoice, rejoice, Christ has come."

MARY WAS SURPRISED BY BEING HIGHLY FAVORED.

It's two places in this text. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored. Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God."

Now what in the world does it mean to be 'highly favored'? What is the meaning of that term?

Joel Osteen pastors the largest church in America, Lakewood Community Church in Houston, Texas. He is also the author of a New York Times best seller, Your Best Life Is Now. He has two chapters on what it means to be highly favored. He says if you're highly favored by God, you don't have to pay tickets when stopped for speeding. I wish that were true. He says if you are highly favored by God, you get seated ahead of others in crowded restaurants.

He says if you are highly favored by God, you find prime parking spots in crowded lots. If you are highly favored by God, you get the job that others are better qualified to have. If you are highly favored by God, you get moved up to first class accommodations on airplanes. If you're highly favored by God, people are just standing in line wanting to help you in every way that they possibly can. Now I want to be generous to my colleagues in ministry around the world, but I want to tell you that's heresy!

Listen to what it was to be highly favored if you were Mary:

She birthed a child out of wedlock. She endured the stares of the Nazarenes. She could find no room in the inn. She never quite understood the mission of Jesus. She endured the misery of the cross, weeping over the death of her son.

At the church Christmas play, five-year-old Jimmy was assigned to be a sheep. So he ran around in the dressing room asking everybody he could find. "I'm a sheep, what are you?" And the children answered—wise man, angel, or whatever their role might be. Finally Jimmy came up to Claire and said, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Claire replied, "I am Mary!" Shocked that he was talking to the main

character, Jimmy continued. "It's hard being a sheep you know!" Not to be outdone Claire replied, "O yeah, it's even harder being a virgin, you know." So the favor of God was not an easy road. But it was a purposeful road.

The favor of God means:

Fulfilling my reason to be born.

Participating in the great purposes of God.

Knowing I am loved, no matter what.

Serving others, instead of myself.

Isn't that what it means to be highly favored?

MARY WAS SURPRISED BY A POWER FROM ON HIGH.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

The ways of God are not our ways. They never have been.

Mary knew how to make a baby but she could not understand why God would want to become an embryo. One of the newer, popular Christmas songs tries to express what Mary must have been thinking in those circumstances:

Mary did you know that your baby boy

Would one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy

Would save our sons and daughters?

Mary did you know that your baby boy

Has come to make you new?

This child that you delivered,

Would soon deliver you?

O Mary, did you know?

How could she know? Who would believe her if she had known? So Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. God's ways are not our ways. That's why it never all makes sense. We are not called to live by fact; we are called to live by faith. The only way to be overwhelmed and surprised by the Christmas Story is to reach into it with all the faith we can possibly express. *The power of the Most High will come upon you.*

The ways of God call for Faith. Faith to wait. While the conception was mysterious and miraculous, the pregnancy was normal, ordinary, an experience that every mother present can readily understand. You just wait and wait and wait for the child to come. What did she think in all that waiting?

The prophet Isaiah said, *They who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint.* Is that what Mary thought? I don't know. But I know she had to wait.

Jesus said to the first believers at his ascension *“Wait in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* Do you have the patience to wait for God?

Faith to Stretch. The physical stretching Mary experienced was nothing compared to the soul stretching necessary to embrace the Son of God. Mary asks the angel, *“How will this be?”* How many times do you think she repeated that question over the next 33 years of her son’s life?

Has your soul lost its elasticity? Is there stretching space inside your soul? Can you still imagine things that never were and ask why not? Do you still dream of justice and mercy, and feel a passion within to bring it about? Have you still the faith to proclaim that *“Nothing is impossible”* when you put your trust in God? Does your soul have that kind of elasticity? Will it stretch big enough for the power of the Most High to come upon you? It takes faith to experience Christmas.

It takes the faith of obedience. You remember what Mary said, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”*

I keep a prayer of Thomas Merton on my desk. In part, it goes like this:

“My Lord, God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. . .But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always. . .Amen.”

Do you ever pray a prayer like that? So be it Lord, let it happen, I’m ready, let’s go.

When our boys were little, I would come home from work at the end of the day, and they would meet me at the door. There I would pick them up, toss them in the air, and kiss them on the way down. One by one, time after time, we would repeat the ritual until my arms grew tired or we were called to dinner. When it was time to quit they would always say, *“Do it again, Daddy, do it again!”*

As Christmas comes near and angels fly by, I think of a world torn by war, troubled by poverty, and often determined to destroy itself. And I find myself saying:

Would you do it again God? Would you do it again?
Would you surprise us with hope?
Would you fill us with love?
Would you come to save us?

O, do it again, God, do it again.

Amen.

