

ADVENT 2020—SEARCHING FOR A SAVIOR
No Surprise
2 Samuel 7:1-11; 16 and Luke 1:26-38
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Christmas is the season for surprises—especially for children. We, I mean Santa, love to surprise children with gifts at Christmas, but as we get older our view of surprises tends to change. How many of you would say you like surprises?

Whenever possible, I try to avoid being surprised by unexpected situations at church. Pastor John King, who I've worked with for 17 years, is especially good about giving me a heads up when difficult situations are unfolding. John frequently comes to me and says something like, *"You don't need to do anything about this. I just want to let you in on what's happening, because I know you don't like surprises."* John's right. I don't like to be caught off guard by unexpected difficult things, but I like good surprises like gifts and trips. A surprise I'll never forget is a trip my wife planned for me to see Penn State play in the 2005 Orange Bowl. I still remember watching the bowl selection show on a Sunday evening. When it was announced that Penn State was playing Florida State in Miami, Greta said, *"You need to call Roger Apple."* I like surprises like that!

Greta on the other hand, doesn't like surprises, good or bad. I rarely surprise her, because she's always tuned into what's going on and honestly I'm not the best at keeping secrets and pulling off surprises. My best surprise for her was arranging for our daughter Bronte to drive home from Nashville for Treyton's high school graduation party. Greta was caught completely off guard when Bronte drove into our driveway in the middle of Treyton's party. That was a great surprise!

Two weeks ago, I was reading over the Advent lectionary texts preparing for today's sermon because I didn't preach last Sunday. As I read over the Old and New Testament readings I was struck by a realization: Jesus' coming shouldn't have been a surprise. Let me explain... Jesus' birth caught people by surprise. They weren't expecting a baby—an infant conceived in a poor, young, unmarried woman. They weren't expecting the Messiah to come from Nazareth—a backwoods town in the middle of nowhere. They weren't expecting the

Messiah to be a humble, suffering servant who taught that we should “turn the other cheek” and that “the poor, those who grieve and the meek and humble would inherit the earth.” When they envisioned the Savior, the Messiah, everyone had been waiting for since the prophet Isaiah prophesied 700 years earlier, they pictured someone much different. People were surprised by Jesus’ coming, but God wasn’t surprised. He had given many clues about the coming of the Messiah that should have been noticed. Jesus’ coming was no surprise. Listen to these words from 2 Samuel chapter 7 that the prophet Nathan spoke to King David 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

2 Samuel 7:1–11;16

After [David] the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.”

But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”’”

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:

Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

And Psalm 89 echoes the same promises. I’ll read verses 1-4 and then verses 19-26:

Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.

I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,

'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'"

Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from among the people.

I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.

My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.

The enemy will not get the better of him; the wicked will not oppress him.

I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.

My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted.

I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers.

He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'

These scriptures don't tell us the circumstances in which Jesus would be born or what his teaching and life would look like, but they remind us that Jesus' arrival was no surprise—God knew what was coming. Since the time of King David God had been communicating that a ruler would come from the line of David who would save God's people and defeat their enemies. The Messiah was sent to usher in a new kingdom—to make right what was wrong in the world by reconciling people with God.

In the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—we read different accounts of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. The rest of the New Testament is primarily focused on helping 1st Century Jews and Gentiles (as well as those who came later) understand that Jesus is the promised Messiah that God was pointing to throughout the Old Testament. In other words, the Good News of the New Testament is that Jesus is no surprise—God had been planning for and paving the way for his coming since He created Adam and Eve in Eden. Listen to the

lectionary reading from Romans chapter 16 verses 25-27—the Apostle Paul’s closing words in his well-known letter, Romans.

Romans 16:25–27

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Paul says that the Gospel he preaches is consistent with God’s revelation that was a hidden mystery for ages past, but now has been revealed as people see the writings of the prophet confirmed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And the great thing about this message Paul says is that it’s not exclusive to Jews; it’s available to everyone, including you and me.

God chose the Jewish people as his people in the Old Testament and over time they began to assume that as God’s chosen people, God’s grace was exclusive to them and to converts who committed to adhering to the Jewish Law that had been given by Moses. God tried to make clear throughout the Old Testament that his love and grace and forgiveness and the possibility of relationship with Him was for all people, but that message was largely misunderstood by Jews and Gentiles. In these verses and throughout his writings, Paul points out that God’s intent was always for all people to know Him. That came as a surprise to Jews and to Gentiles, but it wasn’t a surprise to God; it was always his plan. Look way back at Genesis chapter 12 when God first spoke to Abraham: *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Genesis 12:2 & 3

While people were surprised, it was no surprise to God when Jesus was conceived in the body of young woman named Mary. Listen to the account of the angel’s conversation with Mary in the Gospel of Luke chapter 1 verses 26-38:

Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, 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. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Mary was surprised that she was pregnant with God's Son, but God wasn't surprised by Jesus' birth. During Advent, as we celebrate Jesus' coming as a baby and look forward to his coming for his church, while also crying out, "Come now, Lord Jesus!" It's important for us to remember that nothing that's happening to us now is a surprise to God. The coronavirus caught most of us off guard, but it was no surprise to God. The racial unrest that erupted in cities across our nation this summer following George Floyd's death may have surprised us, but it was no surprise to God. School closings, stay at home orders, churches not meeting face to face, businesses having to shut down, people losing their jobs and struggling financially, and some families being unable to gather as normal for Thanksgiving and Christmas surprised us, but they came as no surprise to God.

The fact that God isn't surprised and that He promises to be with us and work out his purposes in our lives provides great confidence, assurance and hope for all of us. Recently our staff was discussing the importance of hope in a staff meeting and our Children's Pastor, Jen, made a statement I love, "*We have hope and his name is Jesus!*" Can you say that with me? *We have hope and his name is Jesus!*

Jesus' birth was no surprise to God and the circumstances you and I find ourselves in today, while they may surprise us, are no surprise to God. Listen to these words of comfort and hope as I read selected verses from Isaiah chapter 40...

Isaiah 40 selected

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed.

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms And carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

With whom, then, will you compare God? Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. he stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? the LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

As we walk through the last days of Advent before we celebrate Christmas later this week and as we anticipate the New Year of 2021 I hope you're able to take great confidence in the fact that whatever has happened in your past, whatever is happening in your life today and whatever happens in the days, months and years ahead, God is not surprised. He is with you. He loves you. He's working on your behalf. **We have hope and his name is Jesus!**