

God With Us in Surprise
Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016
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Text: Luke 1

There are different kinds of surprises. A surprise birthday party, or a Christmas present you weren't expecting, or simply a kindness that you were unprepared for – those are good surprises, in the family of happiness and joy. But surprise can carry heavier freight too – expectations suddenly dashed, or a promise broken – unwelcomed surprises, in the family of shock and disappointment.

Today my goal is for you to be surprised – and you'll have to decide which kind of surprise it is. But isn't it kind of hard to be surprised if someone tells you they are going to surprise you? – so, I may have messed this up already, but we'll see how it goes.

It might seem trite or cliché to say that the story of the Annunciation and Magnificat is one of surprise – the Angel Gabriel, appears to a young woman - an unexpected encounter which is about Mary expecting – surprise! – or as Mary puts it: 'how can this be?' – Mary is surprised to say the least. It is the announcement of the birth of one who is holy, divine and human present together in this promised One. Here out of the blue comes a most unexpected story – surprise!

But where is the real surprise in this story? Much is focused on here of the miraculous nature of these events – the virgin birth of Jesus by Mary: it's right there in our Apostles' Creed: 'I believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.' And much more doctrine and devotion has developed around these events - in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions Mary is a VERY prominent figure: adoring Mary as the mother of God, while also seeming to mostly emphasize about Mary her virginity, her purity, her lowliness and obedience. In our little Protestant world, we're not so sure what to make of or do with all that about Mary, so we tend to do little at all – other than on the Third Sunday of Advent! Our Protestant sensibilities are uncomfortable with some of the bells and

smells of adoring and praying through Mary; and I also greatly appreciate the feminist theology critiques that identify how portrayals of Mary primarily as obedient and pure can simply be a not too subtle way of keeping men at the top of the hierarchy.

So with all that in mind about Mary, if I were to ask you if you believe this story, you'd probably think I was asking about those kinds of doctrinal things. But I'd like to think of it more like what I was wondering about a couple weeks ago about believing – which is to wonder if you and I live our lives in a way that reflects the claims of this story – if we entrust and pattern our lives to the story that is told here about who God is and who we are, about what this world is and what our place in it is – not believing a doctrine, but accepting a claim on your life. Because, where is the real surprise in this story? – well how about this: God cares about and is at work in this world; God needs people; there are people willing to be needed by God; and nothing is impossible with God. Do you believe that?

While you consider that - I'd like to play around with the idea of surprise for a bit, and make you consider some other things too. When you pay attention to the extreme messed-upedness of this world ('messed-upedness' is an advanced theological term ☺), are you surprised? When you consider the violence and division, the inequity and injustice, the desecration and destruction, in ways great and small, between individuals and nations – are you surprised? It seems to me we have come to not be. I think that's partly due to our weariness, seeing the persistence and pervasiveness of the mess; it's partly our cynicism – 'nothing surprises me anymore!'; partly our complicity, knowing our part in the brokenness; partly our feeling of powerlessness, unable to untangle the mess; AND it's partly our theology, with the narrative that is often recited of sinful people in a sinful world and a God who must be paid for those sins. The story goes that this is a messed-up world and that's just the way it is – and our best hope is for God to save us away from it.

I'd like to say an aside to my esteemed colleague Jill Russell, which is that I don't think I've referenced my go-to theologian James Alison in a sermon for quite a while now – but that streak is about to end! Alison wrote a book with one of my favorite titles – it's called: "The

Joy of Being Wrong”. And if you’d like to skip the several hundred pages of profound but rather difficult reading (his other books are much more readable), I can give you a summary: ‘we’re wrong about ourselves and our world and our God - hooray!’ (the ‘hooray’ is the “Joy” part ☺) What we’re wrong about with ourselves is that it is not natural for humanity to live in brokenness, and what we’re wrong about with God is that God is not out to punish us for our sins. There is a news flash here in this story for all of us: God did NOT send the angel Gabriel to Mary in order to set up a payment plan to God for our sins; God DID send the angel Gabriel to Mary because God loves this world, and enters into this world to free it from death to life.

And here’s the rather odd sounding thing that means for us – which is that we need to recover our surprise at the messed-upedness around us and within us. I want us to be shocked at violence and injustice – I want us to be grieved at divisions among us – I want us to be taken aback by the degradation of God’s world. Surprised because this is not how God made us and this world to be – shocked because God has created us and this world as place that can be a beloved community. Because if we can hold onto that kind of surprise, feeling the affront of such brokenness, then I think we can hear this story of Mary in a particularly powerful way – can hear a different kind of surprise present in it and for us.

Which means that I need to talk to you about this...(pictures of the Annunciation) - perhaps you already noticed it...there should be enough in each of the pews if you share a bit... These are images of mosaics from the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Israel. I was there in 2007, and for me it is the spiritual epicenter of joy on this earth. These mosaics from all over the world are larger than life in size and installed in an outdoor courtyard - and this is only about half of them. Unlike Pastor Jill who last Sunday was able to so vividly use our imaginations to curate some powerful scenes, I felt like I needed to show you some of these. When I saw them I was stunned, shocked, surprised by their incredible beauty – they were to me vivid bearers of life, of joy – embodying the annunciation and birth story. But I want to tell you another part of my surprise. I had been for a couple of weeks in Israel, Palestine, Egypt – and it was intense. There is incredible beauty and history there – and there is deep conflict and

tension and violence - injustice and turmoil along every political, religious, social fault line - I had been to Bethlehem and to go through a huge wall to get there - awful. And then Nazareth itself has a Palestinian population in the midst of Israel - great turmoil. What I felt as I came to Nazareth was the heaviness of all that turmoil. What I also felt was the heaviness of my own life - I had recently been through a divorce - I felt broken and was afraid as a person and parent and pastor of what was ahead for me. In some ways my struggles paled in the context of all I saw, but in some ways I felt a kindred brokenness. And then, Nazareth - when I went there I wasn't expecting much (pun intended 😊). But then I was ambushed - ambushed by joy - surprise! What sense did it make in the midst of the turmoil of this place, in the turmoil of my life, in the messed-upedness of this world to have such a place as this Annunciation basilica? - to have such a tenacious foothold of utter beauty and joy and life? I was surprised - and I still am.

And here's what I would like you to notice about these mosaics (you can also reflect on and notice much more) - within all the color and beauty and diversity and power and light and life of the mosaics, look at the faces - of Mary, of Jesus: there is barely a smile on any of them. I described this as a place of joy, but it is different than a smile - a smile can be in joy, and these images do make me smile - but I believe that the joy these images, those expressions, contain and express is much more about this:

God cares about and is at work in this world; God needs people; there are people willing to be needed by God; and nothing is impossible with God.

That is what the eyes in these mosaics exude - what Mary and the child and this story say - that is the power and beauty and tenderness and persistence and insistence and fierceness and poetry and light and life that is present. These images and this story do not ignore the messed-upedness of this world - instead they defy and resist and subvert and refuse to live by its power - they proclaim a different narrative for our lives and our world..

Do you believe that?

The question isn't a test – for you to pass or fail. The question is our calling together, as a community of faith in Christ. Sometimes I will believe it, for me and for you – and sometimes you will, for you and for me – and together we have this story form our life in and for God's world. And we do so with a sense of surprise. To have the faith to not accept the brokenness of this world – the faith to be taken aback by rather than accept any diminishment of how God created us to be. To have the faith to accept who God is and of who God needs us to be:

God cares about and is at work in this world; God needs people; there are people willing to be needed by God; and nothing is impossible with God.

Surprise! Thanks be to God. AMEN.