

# CHRISTMAS SURPRISES

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Under our Christmas tree are gifts. But their packaging, and their contents, are hidden from view.

It was my delight, as a boy, to secretly examine the packages under our tree. Lift them, test their weight. Gently shake them, listen for a telltale rattle. Try to guess their contents before Christmas morning.

But even if I did guess correctly, my excitement was not diminished when I actually tore them free from their wrappings on Christmas Day.

Christmas has been designed for pleasant surprises!

We may take it for granted, having heard it over and over again, but the first Christmas story has surprising elements that were *radical* to the culture of its day.

*Luke 1:26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. <sup>28</sup> Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you! (Blessed are you among women.)"*

*<sup>29</sup> Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. <sup>30</sup> "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> And He will reign over Israel forever; His Kingdom will never end!"*

*<sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."*

*<sup>35</sup> The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God.*

*<sup>36</sup> What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For the word of God will never fail."*

*<sup>38</sup> Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.*

*<sup>39</sup> A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town <sup>40</sup> where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

*<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. <sup>43</sup> Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?"*

*44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what He said."*

What surprising elements did you note in that partial reading of the Greatest Story ever told?

## **A Woman**

That the central character was a young Jewish woman...

She had to be Jewish by blood... to bear the King of the Jews.

She had to be a woman by nature... to give birth to a Son.

But that's just the thing!

Why was *nature* a part of the works of the God of miracles? Because nature is one of the works of God.

By design, He has chosen to work by natural means, more often than mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.

Part of His self-revealing plan was to instill in nature the fingerprints of His own character and power (Romans 1:20). By studying nature, we may learn also of its Creator.

A young Jewish woman, becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit, is both nature and miracle—working together—to accomplish God's plan.

God's choice was a lift for women everywhere. The angel's words were not just, "Blessed are you," but "Blessed are you before all other women!" (AMP, Luke 1:28), a promise repeated when Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth (Luke 1:42).

This, in direct contradiction to the age-old Jewish tradition of a curse upon women, for the simple fact that Eve was deceived by the serpent, and not Adam (1 Timothy 2:14).

When the miracle-working God could have brought to earth the Man who would save us all without a birth, but by miraculous means, but chose, instead, to bring Him by natural means through a woman—a woman singled out for her own heritage and by God's choice, and without the partnership of a man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit—all women everywhere were blessed by God and elevated among humankind.

And why was Mary chosen to be blessed in such a manner? Elizabeth revealed the cause: "*You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what He said*" (Luke 1:45).

Do you want to be blessed by the Lord and chosen to do His works? (It does not matter if you are male or female.) If you want to be blessed and chosen, then believe Him. Believe that what He has promised He will also perform.

## **A Child**

The second stunning element of this amazing Christmas story was an infant child...

Not just that this Child was the Son of God, but rather that God chose the path of human conception, gestation, and birth as an infant to bring His Son into the world.

Again, working *through* nature, instead of contrary to it, to achieve a miracle among miracles!

God blessed the act of childbirth, which had been cursed with pain because of the disobedience of Eve (Genesis 3:16).

And God chose a child.

From the collective evidence of the Scriptures, according to T.M. Lemos (Bible History Daily, April 16, 2018, The Biblical Archeology Society), "at best, the Israelites held a view of personhood that... saw children as low-level subordinates subject to the wishes and whims of parents... At worst, they were not seen as persons," having social value, at all.

Yet God chose a child! Not a full-grown, wage-earning child, but an infant child.

And thereby, God shifted the value of children, among those who believe in Him, exponentially. He gave them personhood and extreme potential.

Of course, this was underscored by Jesus Himself in later years, when His disciples expressed the traditional view of children as bothersome.

*Mark 10:13* One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so He could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering Him.

*14* When Jesus saw what was happening, He was angry with His disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to Me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. *15* I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." *16* Then He took the children in His arms and placed His hands on their heads and blessed them.

But, as if to emphasize this shift, the first Christmas story reached beyond the extended family of Jesus to make this vital point.

On the night of Jesus' birth, shepherds (strangers) from the fields of Bethlehem were alerted by no less than a choir of heavenly angels that a startling thing had happened in their region that night: *"The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."* (Luke 2:11-12).

By this sign: you will find a baby!

And a startling sign it was!

From that day, and for that reason, babies—and all children—have been esteemed among the faithful for the gifts that they are, for the people they are becoming, and for the Kingdom-potential that they bear.

I hope you will never think of our children as bothersome to God, or as an aggravation to yourself, or as an undesirable distraction to the church. Christmas changed all that!

Christmas changed *all* that!

We are not just baby-sitting children here at Trinity; we are training God-blessed, God-sent world-changers—the next generation of the faithful, who are bringing the Kingdom of God to earth, and may usher in the return of Jesus Christ!

They will replace us as ushers and deacons and teachers. They will become the next generation of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors. Some of them will travel to foreign cultures to tell this great Story to those who have never heard. And perhaps, many will raise their own children to exalt the Savior Jesus.

Every Christmas is full of surprises!

For what we celebrate each December is just the beginning of the Savior's reign. The *"Good News that will bring great joy to all people"* extends *far* beyond the manger scene, far beyond even the cross and the empty tomb, and far beyond your own rescue from sin—it brings us all to the foot of the Throne of God in Heaven, and eternity with Him.

Let's embrace the ways in which God works. He isn't dependent on Nature. He isn't dependent on miracles. He works through both!

And *you* are part of the Nature through whom He works! Don't discount this. Receive this! God can work through you—natural you—to accomplish miracles and wonders. Get your faith ready to say, "Yes, Lord!" "Have Your way, Lord, in me."