
A Christmas Surprise

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 25 December 2023

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Hebrews 1:1-4 • John 1:1-14



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

At Christmas, I often speak about hope. Hope which the Christ child brings to us, hope for the future, because God loves us and sent his only Son to bring us the message of salvation. If God can do that, and more to the point, if God will and does do that, how can we doubt his saving love? How can we think he would ever abandon us?

But besides hope, there is much more. It may seem strange, but I wish today to speak about surprise. Surprise and newness. For God did a new thing, on that Christmas night over two thousand years ago. God did a completely new thing in bringing himself into the world as a human being to walk among us. It wasn't expected by the Jews. They looked for a Messiah, perhaps a general, some strong leader to bring them out of slavery to the Romans.

God surprised the people in that long-ago time by taking direct action to help his people. The Old Testament tells us of many occasions when God inserts

himself in his people's affairs, but it seems to happen less and less as time goes on. In Moses' time, God was an active participant in the lives of the followers of Moses. He spoke and they heard him. He brought forth water in the desert, food in the wilderness. He protected and fed his people. But in later times, the times of the great prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah — God does not seem to play such an active part.

And then came Bethlehem. With the voices of the heavenly host, with the glory of God shining all around, with the star shining overhead, the baby Jesus was born in a humble manger, and the world changed.

We cannot overestimate the effect of God's will in our lives. Truly, the people walked in darkness, as Isaiah said:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. (Isa 9:2)

Isaiah goes on to talk about “the rod of the oppressor” and the “boot of the tramping warrior” (Isa 9:4-5), strong, violent images of a people driven down by an occupying force. This was part of it; but the true “darkness” in the people's lives was their ignorance of the nature of God. Over time, people began to believe that God would no longer intervene directly to help his people. Those times were past; no longer could they hope for a miraculous deliverance. They continued to believe in a Messiah, who would come to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy, but in a distant way.

And this is where we are again today. Many people walk in darkness, doubting God or denying God. They no longer look for Christ coming again. When it happened the first time, it was exciting; but what has happened lately? Nothing, it seems. We are again left on our own. Even many people who believe in God don't believe that he will take any direct action in the life of humankind. Jesus came to earth; he was crucified, died and rose again, and lives still today, in all of us. But that's it. Jesus won't do anything to change the course of human events, or the results of human follies and evils.

But I can't believe that. I believe that Jesus is there with us every moment — he is with us always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:20). That is his promise, and it is the promise of the incarnation. God shows us once and for all, through what he did on that first Christmas so long ago, that he will act in our lives for our good. The bands of angels who sang “Glory to God in the highest” were heralding not just the birth of the Christ child, but the beginning of a new era, and the start of the new covenant with the people of earth. That covenant would be sealed in the blood of Jesus on the cross, but its beginning was the birth of Jesus to Mary in the stable. We need not look for another great event, short of the final judgment, when Christ comes again in glory. Ever

since the incarnation, we have had God's help at hand — “our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Ps 46:1)

God continually surprises us. C S Lewis wrote of being surprised by joy — the joy of God's grace coming through unexpectedly at dark moments. Look into your own lives and see if this is true. God surprised the world on that long-ago day in Bethlehem. By sending his son to us, and later by sending the Holy Spirit, God makes the greatest of promises: turn to me and I will give you life.

This is the hope which Jesus brings to us, the light he brought into the world. To know the nature of God is a gift to all of us who do choose to accept Jesus in our hearts. That does not mean that we know how or why God will intervene in our lives. But hope endures even in the face of all the terrible things we see every day. How can I say that? Because I am convinced, through Scripture and through prayer, that God is working his purpose out. It's really frustrating sometimes that we can't see how that's happening; but it is not for us to know. That's God's job. Our job is do what we can to help those around us in our own little corner of the world.

The message of the star and the angels all those years ago has not faded. The hope which came into the world on that winter night, and the light which was brought to us, has not dimmed. On this Christmas Day, let us remember the child who became our Saviour, and give thanks to God our Father. Amen.