

Margaret and Stephen had been yearning for a child for many years. Both of them dreamed about what it would be like to be a mom and a dad, but things did not turn out precisely as they expected. While Margaret was pregnant complications arose, and it seemed that she might lose her baby. Everyone prayed and when the baby was finally born, she faced several challenges. Little baby Jenny had several physical handicaps. Her parents were thankful that Jenny had survived, but they were also heartbroken over the many challenges that were ahead. Many of their dreams about what this child would be when she grew up had to change. Their world had been turned upside down.

A few years later Stephen and Margaret invited me over on Jenny's fourth birthday. At one point Stephen started telling me about the experience of raising this precious little girl. He talked about the unexpected help that he and Margaret had received from family and friends, and even strangers; how Jenny's progress had taught them to find joy even in small

successes; how raising this child had revealed reservoirs of love and patience in both parents; reservoirs of love and patience they didn't even know they had. He told me how he had been changed for the better by this little girl of his; how his marriage was better; how his prayer life was better; and then with tears in his eyes he looked at me and he said, we thought we knew what kind of child we wanted, well, we didn't get the child we wanted, but we got the child which we needed.

So often in life we think we know exactly how things will be and how they will work out. We have a dream about our present and our future, and we're fairly confident that our plans are good plans, and then our world gets turned upside down. what we thought would happen does not happen. we think we'll get into this boarding school or this college and we don't get in it. we think that our new boss will treat us one way and he or she doesn't; he or she is the opposite of what we had expected.

Over time we realize the spouse we live with is very different than the one we thought we were marrying. The world doesn't go according to our careful plans. Things don't turn out as we want, but we begin to understand what we need. So often we pray asking God to give us one thing and God completely surprises us, bringing us something or someone that turns our world upside down. In today's Gospel we encountered two women whose worlds have been turned upside down. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah had prayed earnestly for a child for years and finally Elizabeth is pregnant with a miraculous child. She finally got what she prayed for. Or did she? As we read on in the Gospel accounts we discover that this child, John the Baptist, is not quite what his parents had planned, for he shows prophetic tendencies, even in today's Gospel leaping for joy in the presence of the Lord. He will later appear in the desert dressed strangely, eating strangely, preaching in a way that ultimately lands

him in jail and costs him his life. He is not the child that Elizabeth and Zachariah had been expecting, but he is the child that they and we needed, the one who would prepare the way of the Lord.

Mary on the other hand, when we meet her in the Gospels, is not asking for a child at all. Remember she's betrothed, technically married to Joseph but not yet living with him as husband and wife. The last thing she needs is a pregnancy. Yet God surprises her. This child in her womb is not what she expected but this child, Jesus, is precisely what Mary and the whole world needs.

Sometimes like Elizabeth, we have to pray for a very long time, and then we realize that God has heard our prayer. But sometimes God gives us not quite what we expected. And then like Mary there are other times when God sends us someone or something completely out of the blue, surprising us in ways that leave us breathless. God has a way of always being bigger than our hopes, more expensive than our dreams.

We have a tendency to try to contain God in the little boxes of our imagination, but the God who sent Jesus into the world did so in order to surprise us with his truth. When people turn out to be different than we expected, when situations turn out to be different than we planned, Jesus Christ is standing there in the midst of it all saying, trust me. This may not be what you expected or wanted, but I know what you need.

In these last days of Advent our readings invite us to remember that God is bigger and better than whatever we've imagined of him in this past year. Our vision of God may just have been too small. So no matter what you think you know of God, be prepared to have it turned upside down in the next year. If you think that God is judgmental, well get ready and watch how Jesus is a God who forgives and loves without ceasing. If you think that God needs to be pleased, then get ready and watched how Jesus is a God who saves us while we are yet still sinners. If you think that God is content to

let us lead a selfish self-centered life well, get ready, and watch how Jesus is a God who calls us to proclaim good news to the poor, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to work for peace, get ready, Jesus is a God humble enough to be born in a smelly barn, and who's humble enough to die on a bloody cross. This is perhaps not the God we expected, but this is certainly the surprising God that we all need.