

Sermon Notes - December 20, 2020

"Surprise, Mary"

(Luke 1:26-38)

How many of you like surprises? I bet if I would ask the kids, they would like some surprises for Christmas Day, wouldn't you? Most of us like surprises but they come in all sorts of forms, don't they? Dr. Chuck Swindoll, who is a Minister in Texas and a book author, once said that, "Surprises come in all kinds of forms and shapes. Sometimes they are good; some are bad; some are scary; and some are hilarious. God has a way of weaving surprises through the fabric of our lives - sometimes they come in unexpected junctures in our lives and some are unpredictable." I think as we read the gospel lesson today, we know that Mary was surprised. She was shocked, and probably astonished and overwhelmed.

I want you to think about why she was surprised as we go through the sermon today - but I want to tell you about some other surprises. One is one that I heard on the news (about two weeks ago) about some policemen who surprised some unexpected travelers on the highway. They stopped them in town and the person said, "Why in the world are the policemen stopping me? Did I run a red light? I don't think so. Am I speeding? I don't think so." When they were pulled over, the policeman surprised them and said, "Merry Christmas" and gave them a Wal-mart gift card or a bag of groceries or a gas gift card. Unsuspecting people got a wonderful surprise that day.

There's another man that got a surprise and his name was Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Dr. Schweitzer was a European medical doctor and a college professor of medicine. One day he was sitting in his home office and preparing for his next day's lectures at the university. His housekeeper walked in and laid the mail on his desk. He stopped what he was doing, started sorting through the mail, and found a magazine that didn't have his name on it. It had the name of somebody else. He thought, "Well I guess they put it in my mailbox by accident." But he opened it up and it fell open to an article called, "The Need in the Congo Mission in Africa." He was intrigued and he read the whole article. When he got to the

bottom of the article, the author had written these words, "I pray that as I submit this article to this magazine that God will touch somebody's heart, somebody that God has already chosen, to come to the Congo and be a medical doctor and help us build a hospital." Dr. Schweitzer closed the magazine, pulled out his diary, and wrote a note in it. The note said, "My search is over. I have found what God wants me to do with my skills and abilities." From that day forward, Dr. Schweitzer committed to be a medical missionary doctor in the Congo, and he went on to build a hospital and serve as a doctor in Africa for the rest of his life. Now, I want to ask you a question - was this by chance or one of God's surprises? That magazine article was intended for somebody else, but it came in his box by accident - the exact article where he needed to know what he was to do - it fell open to that exact page. He felt the spirit of God calling him to Africa. God surprises us like that sometimes, doesn't he?

I want you to know that God surprised Mary. Think about all of the surprises that she got: #1: An angel came to her. How would you feel if, out of the blue, some angelic messenger of God appeared to you and said, "Guess what? You are favored. God has chosen you and he's got something special for you to do"? Surprise #2: "Here's what he wants you to do. He wants you to bear a child. And not just any child, but the Son of God." Then she said, "How's that to happen? I know I'm engaged, but we don't live together; we've never had relations; I am a virgin. How can this be?" Surprise #3: Nothing is impossible with God. He says to her, "You remember your cousin, Elizabeth who is in her old age, and her husband Zacharias, the temple priest? You remember how much they have wanted a child? They are now in their old age and she is in her sixth month of pregnancy. Surprise, Mary! God will send the Holy Spirit upon you and create a child within you - that is both human and divine - the Son of God."

I want you to know that Mary is surprised - shocked - overwhelmed. The scripture doesn't tell us all that went on in her head, but can't you imagine if you were a young, unmarried girl (about 15-years of age) who was getting ready to have a child (and not just ANY child - but the Son of

God)? In their day and time, women were engaged between the age of 12-15 years of age and oftentimes by the age of 15 or 16, they were already having children. Mary was steeped in the Jewish faith. She knew that the Old Testament prophecy said that this Messiah would come through the lineage of David. He would be the Son of God - the Savior. She knows the prophecies. *All of a sudden, God has picked her for something special. I could only imagine that it took a lot of courageous faith on her part for her to say that, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be according to what you have said."* Now, sometimes if you look at a 15 or 16-year old child, you would say, "My son or daughter is not mature enough to babysit, much less to have their own baby." ***But God chose to do his most important work through a little girl named Mary. It took courageous faith.***

John Wayne, of the western movies, once said, "Courage is feeling afraid but saddling up anyway." Winston Churchill said, "Faith and courage are some of the first qualities needed for anybody to accomplish great things in their lives." I tell you that Mary had courageous faith. She chose to believe that God could do the impossible and God used her. ***God surprised her and surprises us.***

I want you to think about some of the ways that He has surprised us. He loved us so much that he came in the form of a human baby. He came born in a stable, not in the Hilton Hotel. He came born to poor parents - peasant parents, not a royal King and Queen. He was born in a little obscure town of Bethlehem, not in the big cities like Jerusalem or Rome. ***He was born for you and me because God wanted us to know His love and God wanted us to know how to love one another.***

I want to tell you a couple of stories today. One of them is by an unknown author and it's called "A Baby's Hug." It's about a young couple with a baby about 18-months old. They went into a restaurant to eat and while they were there, there was a homeless man who sat across from them. The homeless man was disheveled. He wore a holey, tattered coat, smelled like he was intoxicated, and had not had a bath in two or three days. He sat there and he started talking to this little baby boy (whose name was Eric). He said, "Eric, you sure are a handsome little man" and

he started playing peek-a-boo with the baby. The parents were getting uncomfortable - they wanted him to leave - but he sat there. When the Dad and Mom finished eating, they got up and left. As the mother walked by to leave, the little boy held out his hands to be picked-up by the homeless man. I want you to know that man took the baby in his arms and the little baby laid his head on his chest and hugged the man. Then little Eric took his arms and stretched them back out to his mother, and the mother took him. The homeless man said, "God bless you, ma'am. That's a fine young boy. Please take care of him." She said, "I will." She walked out - trying to walk as fast as possible to get away from that man, but not before he said these words: "God bless you, ma'am. I received my Christmas gift today." When she walked out the door, she said, "Lord, please forgive me for judging." ***What that woman experienced that day and all those diners, was the witness of God's love in the innocence of a child.*** You see, God came at Christmas to show us His love - born in human flesh - to live and dwell among us - to preach, teach, live, die, and be resurrected for our sins. "For God so loved..." "For God so gave... His only Son for us."

I want to share another story that I think will tell you about the love of God and the love we are to have for one another. Dr. Tony Campolo is a Baptist Pastor and college professor in Pennsylvania. He tells this story in one of his books called, "Who Switched the Price Tags?" The story is about a school teacher named Mrs. Emma Thompson who taught the fifth grade. She tried to treat all of her kids the same way. But, one year she had a little boy named Teddy Stoddard in her class. Teddy was a trouble-maker; he didn't like school; his grades were awful and his attitude was even worse. She almost resented his attitude. In fact, when she graded his papers, she almost enjoyed giving him F's. One day, after about two months, she decided that there has to be something in that boy's background that had made him this way. She decided to look at his end-of-year reports from the other teachers. In the first grade, the teacher wrote, "This child shows great promise and creativity." In the second grade, the teacher said, "This boy's mother is sick and his grades are going downhill." In the third grade, the teacher didn't say anything about his home life, but said, "This kid is a very slow learner." In the fourth

grade, the teacher still didn't say, "This kid's mother died and his father is an alcoholic. This boy has no encouragement." She didn't mention that - just, "This kid is failing. He is not doing well in school." Mrs. Thompson had him in the fifth grade. She said, "I knew there had to be something going on, but I didn't know what."

It got to be Christmas-time and all the kids brought gifts for the teachers. They are all beautifully wrapped and decorated in boxes and bags - but there was one little gift there that was in this dirty paper bag with a shredded ribbon around it and Mrs. Thompson's name on it. She knew immediately that it was from Teddy Stoddard. She went through all the presents, ooh-ed-and-aah-ed, and thanked the kids. Finally, she got to Teddy's gift. He gave her a gaudy, rhinestone bracelet with half of the gemstones missing and a half a bottle of used perfume. All of the kids started giggling and making fun of his gift. Mrs. Thompson decided that she had to make something good out of that gift. She put the bracelet on, sprayed the perfume on her wrists, and said, "Oooh, doesn't that smell lovely?" - and she had the other kids to smell it. "Doesn't it smell good, kids?" Finally, some of the kids caught on and said, "Oooh. Ahhh" - and made it sound good. At the end of the day, all the kids left to go home for Christmas break, but little Teddy stayed after school to talk to his teacher. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Mrs. Thompson, you know you smell like my mother used to smell. That bracelet looks really nice on your arm. Mrs. Thompson, my mom died when I was in the second grade. I'm an only child and my dad drinks all the time. In fact, he passes out on the sofa every night. By the way, Mrs. Thompson, Merry Christmas" - and he ran out the door. Mrs. Thompson decided that she couldn't hold her tears back anymore, and she stood there and cried as Teddy went out the door -- "Lord, forgive me for not being more patient and understanding and loving to that child." During Christmas break, that teacher's attitude changed and so did Teddy's. He came back to school after Christmas and his attitude was better. He started making better grades. You see, Mrs. Thompson started tutoring him after school and every chance she got, she would give him a word of affirmation, encouragement, and a loving hug. Teddy finished fifth grade with high marks. Mrs. Thompson figured that she would never see him again.

Seven years later, he graduated from high school and he wrote her a note. It said, "Dear Mrs. Thompson, I finished high school and I'm number two in my graduating class." Four years later, she received another letter. "Dear, Mrs. Thompson, Thank you for what you meant in my early years. You will never know how much your love and affirmation meant to me. Thanks for being the best teacher I ever had. By the way, I have finished college and I'm number one in my graduating class." Six years later, he sent her another letter that said, "Dear Mrs. Thompson: I just want you to know that my name is now Theodore Stoddard, MD. I finished medical school and I'm getting married. I don't know if you know it or not, but my dad died a few months ago and I don't have any family. I would be honored if you would come to my wedding and sit in my mother's place." Mrs. Thompson said there was nothing going to stop her from that wedding. She showed up that day and she still had that little gaudy bracelet and she put it on under her dress sleeve. She said, "I found some of that perfume that his mother liked and I bought some and sprayed it on me." Nobody else would've caught it, but Teddy did. "Teddy came up and gave me the biggest hug" and he said, "Thank you so much for being here. Thanks for loving me when I wasn't so loveable. Thanks for helping me and being my inspiration. Thank you for loving me and being here today." I don't think Teddy ever forgot Mrs. Thompson, do you?

I want you to know that God surprises us sometimes. He surprised the world when he came as a baby in the human flesh. He came to show us his love for us by coming and living among us, dwelling, preaching, teaching, dying, and being resurrected. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only and best gift, his Son, to love us and to teach us to love one another. ***I hope this Christmas (and this year) that you will be surprised by God's love. Maybe God has something unexpected for you to do. Maybe he has somebody that he wants you to love in a different way - in the family, at school, at work. May God surprise you with his love for you and may he surprise you by calling you to love someone different this year. May God bless us each. Amen.***