
December 4, 2011—2nd Sunday of Advent

Ps 85:1-2, 8-13, Is 40:1-11, 2Pet 3:8-15a, Mk 1:1-8

UN-SURPRISE SURPRISE PARTY

Theme: God's Gentle Surprises

by J Nichols Adams

STARTING THOUGHTS

God's timing is something that puzzles us all. Some see God's timing as something that is just around the corner, just about to sneak up on us. But is God being sneaky or is God being gentle and patient? Does God want to scare us into submission or does God want to surprise us in a gentle way? I think we may be scared of being surprised. We've come to believe that life is made up mostly of scary surprises.

In the old comedy *I Love Raymond* there was an episode called Debra's Surprise Party. It is an excellent example of how we really see surprises. Debra's mother, Lois, suggests to Raymond that she throw a surprise birthday party for her daughter and Ray won't have to lift a finger. Debra senses something is afoot and forces Ray spills the beans. Instead of the themed surprise her mother plans Debra wants a Chinese banquet instead. Ray then convinces his mother-in-law to change her planned theme to the Chinese banquet, never disclosing to her or to anyone that for Debra there is no surprise. Inevitably, all is revealed when Debra arrives home to a houseful of guests and feigns complete surprise. Ultimately she embarrasses herself, her husband and disappoints her mother, who wanted, more than anything, to surprise her daughter. Debra wanting to be in control spoils the surprise and missed out on the joy of the occasion for herself and everyone else. Maybe we are a lot like Debra. We miss out on the gentle surprises in our lives by not being open enough, willing to give up control.

We may well be afraid of nasty surprises but there is something deep inside that makes us want the thrill of a gentle life changing surprise. Should we live our life afraid of what God has waiting for us. As Christmas anticipation grows within us this Advent Season help us to trust in the possible wonderful and gentle surprises of this season.

EXEGETICAL COMMENTS

The beginning of the Gospel of Mark needs to be considered carefully. . We too easily take it for granted. When we look at the beginning of the Gospel we at first see what we expect "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God." It is what is at the very heart of the start of Mark. There is an aspect of Mark's understanding of the word we normally translate as "Gospel". Mark's understanding is one of "joyful tidings". Mark opens with the joyful tidings of the coming of something very special. Mark is speaking in terms that everyone in both Roman and Jewish

cultural would understand. The term evangel or gospel was not a word first coined by the Christians. It was in common use. Among the Romans it meant “joyful tidings” and was associated with the cult of the emperor and the emperor’s birthday. Evangel was the name of the reports in the inscriptions talking about the happy event. (William L Lane *The Gospel of Mark The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, 1974] p43) Modern day Christians find three surprises in the way the Gospel of Mark begins. The first surprise is the abruptness with which the gospel is suddenly announced. The second surprise is that while the other Gospel narratives start with the birth story Mark does not. The last surprise is God’s promise of salvation. The huge surprise is the simplicity of salvation. If you compare this to the more complex Sanskrit religious writing from Indian for instance the story about Jesus is amazing simple. If you expect salvation to be full of long ascetic training, complex rituals and obscure writings to be profound then the simplicity of Gospel comes as a wonderful surprise. The real problem for modern Christians is recapturing the surprise of learning that God will redeem humanity from the cosmic and human powers of suffering, evil, and injustice. Recapturing the surprise of God’s total salvation means we realize that Christ promise of salvation is for the whole world which is different from the false prophets that want to isolate Christ’s followers from the world. (Pheme Perkins *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Volume 8 [Nashville, 1995] p529)

In the Isaiah passage, it is easy to overlook the fact that it starts off “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” The beginning of this new surprise for God’s people is gentle and comforting. Not loud and brash or full of fanfare. Isaiah does not set out to frighten his listeners but gave instead to them a gentle surprise. Isaiah’s surprise which is echoed in Mark, is that “You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” Isaiah then ends with a very gentle image of God that Jesus echoed when he points out that “the Sovereign LORD comes with power... “That God is “like a shepherd and gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Isaiah, like Mark, gives us a gentle insight about our future with God.

PREACHING POSSIBILITIES

We have an opportunity here to show how Mark comes in to surprise us in a gentle way about the coming of Jesus. Mark’s gospel is a bit of a surprise for a Christmas reading since there is no birth narrative, but suddenly it all makes sense. Mark surprising gift is the simplicity and joy of the beginning of his gospel, the simplicity of his message of salvation.

The fun and exciting part of preaching for this week can be about how we can live our lives waiting for God’s gentle surprises. No big fanfare. No yelling to get our attention. No earth shattering revelations. We often turn to God in times of fear but we often forget to turn to God in our times of gentleness. We all know we live in a world of fearful surprises but rarely think in terms of

God's gentle surprises.

One of the ways to explore a gentle surprise is through the tradition of the surprise party. It is good to explore the different ways people react to surprise parties and the way they sometimes try to control the surprise party they suddenly discover. It may be relevant to ask the question is this a good analogy about how we try to control the surprises in our lives even God's surprises

SERMON ILLUSTRATIONS

The movie *Second Hand Lion* starts in the summer of 1962, 12-year old Walter Caldwell (Haley Joel Osment) is taken by his fortune-hunting mother, Mae (Kyra Sedgwick), to live with his bachelor great-uncles, Hub and Garth McCann (Robert Duvall and Michael Caine). The uncles are rumored to have a secret fortune. When they first arrive, they are greeted by the uncles' pets, a mixed and mangy pack of six dogs, and a pig. They find Hub and Garth knee-deep in their pond, shooting bass with shotguns. Neither they nor Walter are initially pleased to see the other.

Soon Hub, Garth, and Walter have adventures of their own. Hub and Garth purchase a clay pigeon thrower, a succession of ever-larger boats, and a biplane with their wealth. They buy an aging lioness from a circus animal dealer and Walter adopts and names the lioness Jasmine (a name with deep significance to Hub, as Garth reveals to his great-nephew),. Hub gets into and wins a fight with several local toughs.

Throughout the film Garth tells Walter the stories about their mysterious past: Garth reveals to him that he and Hub were adventurers beginning their arrival in France the day Germany invaded in the First World War. Following their army service, Garth becomes a guide in Africa, while Hub travels the world and helps anybody in need of it. During these travels, Hub meets and falls in love with Jasmine a beautiful young princess. She, however, has been promised to a young and powerful Sheik. After Hub rescues Jasmine from the Sheik, a bounty of ten thousand gold pieces is put on Hub's head. Garth, disguised as a bounty hunter turns Hub in for the reward as a set-up. Hub duels the Sheik and wins but spares the Sheik's life.

One night Walter asks Hub about what happened to Jasmine. Hub tells Walter that Jasmine and her child (died in childbirth). As times passes the three grow closer and you see where they are living life more happily than before. Walter even finds his uncles' fabled wealth.

Eventually, Walter's mother and her current suitor, an "Investigator" named Stan (Nicky Katt), arrive at the farm to find the money. Stan tries to make Walter believe that Hub and Garth were actually bank robbers and that Jasmine was their accomplice, and the fortune is theirs for the taking. When Walter refuses to tell where the money is he is viciously beaten by Stan. Jasmine (the lioness) attacks Stan and seriously wounds him, but it the lioness that dies when her heart gives out.

The next day, Walter is taken away by his mother, but during an emotional argument, Walter asks her to "do something for me for once", and she lets him return to live with his uncles.

In the film's epilogue, which takes place several years later, Walter (Josh Lucas) is now a successful cartoonist whose comic strip ("Walt and Jasmine") is based on his experiences with his uncles. He receives a phone call one day to be told that his two great-uncles have passed. Walt returns to the farm to learn that they died when attempting to fly their biplane upside down into their barn.

At that moment a helicopter touches down and a North African man (Eric Balfour) steps out with his little son accompanying him. He explains that he heard of the men's deaths on the news and thought those two might be the two courageous Americans whose tales his grandfather, (the Sheik), would tell him about when he was a little boy. When Walt affirms it and tells the sheik's grandson that the pair raised him, the three are happy to realize that the stories which had inspired them for so long were true — that the two men "really lived." The surprise at the end was that the uncles were telling the absolute truth not tall stories. They each had lived an incredible life full of adventure. The other gentle surprise is that they turned out both to be great fathers to Walt.



If you want to add something about a happy surprise you could refer to the youtube video of the proposal where the bride to be passes out. This would be very good if you have a multimedia addition to your sermon. (http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=proposal+girl+faints&aq=f)



Author and speaker Terry Esau decided to question his monotonous way of life back in 2005 when he embarked on a 30-day faith experiment. The objective was simple: Start each day by simply saying, "Surprise me, God." He explains the premise of his faith experiment on the book's website:

"Wouldn't it be cool if our faith were a little rawer, a little more real, more spontaneous, unscripted, more like an adventure? By simply beginning each day with a request for God to surprise him in some way, Esau experienced life in a much deeper, meaningful way. He saw God in his interactions with his children. He found God on a routine bike ride. He discovered surprises about who he is and who he is not. He witnessed God's hand in the day-to-day monotony that all of us can get caught up in. As a single you may be waiting for the next big surprise from God. Esau notes in his book that not all of God's surprises during his faith experiment were easy to handle. But by opening ourselves to God's will, we allow Him to work in us in the very way He chooses.

There are many things in life that we can plan for – retirement, vacations, new homes, career moves. But we cannot plan for the infinite amount of blessings God is waiting to bestow on each of us through life's surprises. Start tomorrow with the simple phrase, "Surprise me, God," and wait to be surprised. (<http://www.catholicmatch.com/blog/2011/02/a-daily-request-surprise-me-god/>)



God's surprises doesn't happen every day, but when they do, you know

it. Usually they're so out of the ordinary that they couldn't be mere coincidence. Also, they usually have some very personal meaning for you.

My Dad loved coin banks. He had several that he dropped spare change into regularly, but he was especially fond of quarters. Saving quarters was a habit he practiced all his life.

Continued on page 66

WORSHIPAID

Call to Worship (Based on Psalm 85)

Leader: You, LORD, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

People: You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.

Leader: I will listen to what God the LORD says; God promises peace to God's people.

People: Love and faithfulness meet together

Leader: righteousness and peace kiss each other.

People: Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

Prayer of Confession

O Lord, we confess that when it comes to getting surprised by something good in our lives our first impulse is to run away. O God we confess that we treat Your many surprises with the same horror we treat surprise parties. We keep waiting not with joy but with anxiety. O Lord, give us the real anticipation of Christmas Eve, when we suddenly just like children know that the surprise waiting for us will fill us with joy. We confess it is easy to be anxious and we confess that it is very difficult to be enthusiastic about the next wonderful surprise in our lives. As we face each test let us look for Your surprise in the middle of our fear. We pray for this in Jesus name.

Prayer of Dedication

Let these gifts surprise others. Let these gifts surprise the givers. Let these gifts surprise the receivers. Let these gifts surprise the world as Jesus surprised the whole world. We pray in the name of the Jesus who surprised the whole world. Amen

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord in this Advent season we spend more and more time trying to think of good gifts and good surprises for those we love. We admit we ask for help from them and they do point out that they need this piece of clothing or that new tech toy, but even when we get it we feel like we still need to give them a good surprise.

As we puzzle over trying to give a good surprise to the people we love and admire we know instinctively how hard it is to surprise anyone in a good way. This Christmas help us surround ourselves with God's wonderful surprise and the wonderful surprises that we suddenly see in our lives. Help us change our ideas about surprises. Help us to see Your gentle surprises in our lives as something totally different from the surprises we have come to fear. Help us to see Your gentle surprises in our lives as something totally different from the disruptive surprises' we have been trained to expect. Help us escape our limited view of Your world. Help us instead to see Your surprising world. We pray in the name of Jesus Your wonderful surprise that keeps giving us wonderful surprises.

Extra Materials

Continued from page 5

A few years after he died, something strange started happening. My mother and I began to find quarters. Sometimes they'd be in the house, sometimes outdoors or in our cars.

If it were just one or two, I'd admit it was only coincidence. But my mother has an envelope full of them, and I have six on my nightstand that I found in the past two years. Never nickels, dimes or pennies. There were just quarters. Is that just wishful thinking, or one of God's surprises? Maybe something unexplainable like that has happened in your life. Maybe a job or a check showed up, right when you needed it. Or maybe it was a person whom you hadn't seen for years, and you met by sheer coincidence. Or was it? A few seconds either way or you would have missed each other.

Some folks like to attribute everything from finding a parking place to passing a history exam to "God's favor." If you haven't had one of God's surprises in your life yet, keep watching.

Scripture tells us that he delights in blessing his children. I'm sure he has a few delightful surprises in store for you too. (www.inspiration-for-singles.com/surprises.html)



One day, my wife and I were returning home from a visit to the mountains in western Colorado. As we drove down a steep and winding two lane highway we were confronted literally with a herd of cattle blocking the road as the rancher was moving them from one field to another some distance away. The cattle were being driven by three or four cowboys who were having a tough time keeping the cows on track down the road as they wandered off into nearby fields or backed up in the direction from where they had come. We offered to help "drive" the cattle from the back moving forward slowly down the middle of the road to keep the cattle together allowing the cowboys to deal with the cows on either side. When the herd was safely delivered to the new field the cowboy rode up to the side of the car and thanked us profusely for our help and our patience. It all seemed so totally surreal. It must have added thirty minutes to our drive but in 13 years of driving that road we've never seen anything like it. Even today we still smile every time we are on that piece of road, remembering the day God let us be cowboys in a Lincoln Navigator!

Continued from page 10

The little boy shifts in his seat, but still doesn't answer.

The pastor is starting to get angry at the boy's refusal to converse and practically shouts "Where is God?"

To the pastor's surprise, the little boy jumps up out of his chair and runs out of the office.

The boy leaves the church and runs all the way home, up the stairs and into his brother's room. He shuts the door and pants, "We're in BIG TROUBLE. God's missing and they think we did it!"



A recent trip to the dentist proved to me we don't trust God's surprises. I scheduled a major cleaning over two different appointments. On the second appointment as the dental assistant was cleaning my teeth she knocked out one of my fillings. To say that I was upset would be an understatement. I thought I have already spent several hours in the week before in the dental chair, and here I was looking at even more time in the dentist chair.. All I could think about was how unlucky I was. I felt picked upon. This could not be anything good. I got an emergency appointment to fix the tooth. My kindly dentist worked away for a long time to repair the tooth that had been damaged. After several hours with two people's hands in my mouth and my jaw aching I could not think of this whole thing as one of God's wonderful surprises. But as I was leaving the dentist, my dentist said: "I am so glad you came in. If this had not happened we would have to do a root canal." I guess it was a kindly surprise after all.



How many of us live like Charles Bunn who Jack London wrote about in 1905. Bunn was a prospector in the Yukon in 1900. One winter Bunn and his partners went far into the Arctic Circle. Bunn broke his ankle and the party began to run out of food, the decision was made to leave Bunn behind. Bunn finding himself without food, matches or anything else could only crawl along the ice and snow trying to save himself. Bunn ate everything he could find from raw minnows to marrow from a dead carcass. He dragged himself along for 8 days. He crawled into an outlying camp set up by the Inupiat–Yupik tribe. The native people bundled Bunn into animal skins and fed him. In time he gained enough strength to sit in a dog sled. The kindly Inupiat–Yupik took him back to a city and his ankle was set by a doctor. Friends of Bunn noticed a year later that no matter where Bunn went he always had a supply of water, food and matches with him at all times. After Bunn's ordeal he promised himself it would never happened again. (Dennis E Hensley Surprises and Miracles of the Season [Kansas City, 2002] p31) Charles Bunn spent many years after his ordeal waiting for an evil surprise. Bunn lived his life afraid of another negative event in his life. How many of us do the same? God on the other hand encourages us to do just the opposite. We can live in dread or we can live in the hope of Christmas.

Continued from page 14

dated the day of his high school graduation fell into his lap —in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together. The gift had been there all along . . . but he had turned away. (<http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/112899.html>) We often want God and other people to surprise us in only the way we expect. But God and people surprise us in ways we need not in the ways we want.



A man walks into a bar and orders a drink. Instead of giving the man a drink, the bartender points a gun at him. The man says "thank you" and leaves the bar. So what is the surprising answer?The man had the hiccups. (by Joshua Porter <http://bokardo.com/p/24>)

Continued from page 14

A colleague of my wife was totally distraught to find that her unmarried daughter was pregnant. It seemed to be tearing apart a family that had been so very close. The Mom was so angry that this has happened and was really distancing herself from her daughter at a time her daughter needed her the most. She said to my wife that all of this was such an unbelievable mistake. Knowing her friend to be a believer my wife said quietly, "Whatever has happened and whatever does happen, God makes babies He doesn't make mistakes." Years later the Mom let my wife know that this was a turning point in how she handled her daughter's pregnancy. However big the surprise we need to know that this new life was a gift from God.



And for my own story, my wife and I have been blessed with wonderful sons. We struggled for years with infertility and after many disappointments our family seemed complete, We had two beautiful healthy sons with the support and help of some very dedicated doctors. Our youngest son had just passed his first birthday. We had moved into a new house. I had started in a new parish and my wife had just received a much sought after promotion. Life was hectic and full and happy. And then my wife got sick. She seemed easily tired and appeared run down. It didn't occur to either of us what the cause might be and there it was. No medical interventions, no doctors' visits or charts or timetables – she was pregnant! As a geriatric pregnancy my wife was none too thrilled but from that moment on our youngest has changed who we were to be as parents and as a family in ways to numerous to count. Life without him is unimaginable. We thought we had our lives planned out. God surprised us with His plan.

Continued from page 65

every Morgan Stanley employee safely evacuated the South Tower on 9/11. And while Rick could have joined them, he continued to help others evacuate the building and ultimately gave his life. Rick's wife Susan and his son Trevor accepted the award on his behalf." The Blog@Homeland Security. *Honoring Rick Rescorla*. [September 22, 2011]).



It is still tempting for some quarters of the nation's media or leaders to portray Americans as heartless or of not somehow paying 'their fair share' when it comes to disaster response or social ministry. This characterization flies in the face of American's personal experience as well as the data. One thing to include in any sermon about disasters is information which refutes this characterization. Taking just one disaster, Haiti as the example, the donations by private citizens and organizations tops out at \$1,245M, with the largest amount coming from the United States at \$219M, followed by Canada at \$170M. This site has the most recent data and a helpful active chart that will make the point visually if your sanctuary has video capabilities (The Guardian 2011 [www.guardian.co.uk/.../2010/jan/14/haiti...country-donations on September 25, 2011]).