



Advent 2022 How Christmas Began¹

Summary: The first Christmas was full of shocking, unexpected, unforeseen, surprises.

Recently I read an article titled, *The Wisdom of God-Centered Rhythms in a Me-Centered Age*. I'll share a quote with you because it helps communicate what we're trying to do by emphasizing Advent this year. It said,

When every moment of our [cultural] existence conditions us to celebrate the self, the church boldly celebrates something bigger and grander and more compelling. In an age of nauseating narcissism where everyone clamors for stardom and Instagram likes, the church humbles us and weekly reminds us: this is not about you. This is about God. You are welcome here, you are wanted, your presence in the body is important. You are part of the story. But God is the star, not you. What a freeing and wonderful thing.²

Church, this has been my hope for us. That Advent would be a useful seasonal tool helping us to stare at Christ and remember, Christmas is not primarily about me, it's about Christ, Immanuel – God with us. He has come and He will come again. I have a part to play, but He's the real star.

So, we've taken time to remember all the promises and prophecies God made about a coming Savior. We've considered why it was so important that He was fully God and fully man, born to a virgin. And we've looked at all the other stuff - like Santa and Rudolph and Christmas trees - that has been added to our celebration of Christmas, most of it in the past 200 years. If you missed any of that you can find it on the podcast, in the app, or online.

This morning, we take a look at what actually happened that first Christmas. We'll return to some Scripture we've seen already, but we'll see it from a new angle as we notice that the first Christmas was a season full of shocking surprises and diverse reactions when God did something people had heard of, but didn't expect to be personally involved with.

Matthew wrote a biography of Jesus, and tells us how it all unfolded. Read along with me:

Matthew 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed [we might say engaged, but it's more than that] to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Adapted from my sermon *God's Surprising Plan for Christmas*, 2018.

² Brett McCracken, *The Wisdom of God-Centered Rhythms in a Me-Centered Age*

The Bible doesn't really tell us much about Mary. We have her family tree, we know her lineage, but there's nothing to suggest there was anything extraordinary, or special about her. There was nothing that made people expect she would be the one God would use. No one heard about this sudden, miraculous pregnancy and said, "Well, that's odd, but if it could be anyone it would be Mary."

No, this young girl, happily engaged to a respectable young man, was surprised when an angel suddenly showed up, out of nowhere one night, and said "Mary, God wants to use you in an extraordinary way."

It was a shocking, unrehearsed, unscheduled, surprise that turned Mary's life upside down. This is not what she had planned. Of all the things that go through a woman's mind in the days and weeks leading up to her marriage, of all the things she thinks about and plans for, this one – I guarantee you - never comes up: that you will be miraculously pregnant with the Son of God, the Savior of the world. And yet, here she is.

And it wasn't just a surprise to her, her life was now bound up with Joseph, her fiancé. Anything that happened to one of them affected both of them – and unexpected pregnancies are kind of a big deal no matter what century you live in:

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

When Joseph found out his fiancé was pregnant, and he knew the baby wasn't his - he was ready to call things off quietly without making a scene.

Which shows us, once again, this was a surprise to both of them. It wasn't expected. It's not as if everything suddenly made sense to him. It wasn't like he said, I always knew there was something special about her... I figured something like this would happen. No, it was a surprise to both of them and neither was sure exactly how to respond at first.

So, God also sent an angel to Joseph, to confirm what was happening, that yes, God had just dropped a gigantic surprise into their two young lives.

20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,*" which is translated, "God with us."

Now, at this point in Joseph's life he's thinking about a lot of things - he's got a wedding coming up, so he's thinking about that - wondering what it will be like to live with someone,

wondering what it's like to be a husband and have those responsibilities. And he's thinking of all the things he needs to do - he has his regular job to take care of, he's engaged to be married, they have a big trip coming up because the government is requiring some census, it's going to be at least a week of travel round trip, and now *this*, this unexpected pregnancy? *This was not in the plans*. But God showed up, confirmed what was happening and spoke truth into his life.

Friends, God does that. He did it back then, and He does it today – God shows up in our lives and surprises us by inviting us into something we didn't ask for, plan on, or dream up on our own. And just like Joseph, we have to decide, how will we respond? Will we let God have His way in us, or will we resist? Well, a young man in Israel provides us with a noteworthy example of willing submission.

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her [that means they were not physically intimate] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

This young couple was surprised by God but yielded in surrender to His divine plan. Their lives were disrupted, but they got to see and experience things that shaped the flow of history. Others were similarly startled by these events, but their reactions were mixed. Then, as today, some people choose to explore what God is doing while others resist it. Read with me and notice the contrast:

Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod was troubled because *he* was the king and he was comfortable. He enjoyed his position and his power; he enjoyed being able to make his own decisions and run his own life. He was troubled because suddenly there was a threat to all that. Important people were trying to discover what God was doing, and what God was doing felt threatening to him. He was like a mama bear ready to defend her cubs. Only the cubs weren't cute little baby bears, the cubs were his lifestyle, his throne, and his power.

Not everyone is thrilled when God shows up in their life for a surprise visit. Some people feel threatened by God. They're afraid of changes they'll have to make, or of what they might lose, if God is real and here right now. They've made plans for life that don't include God, or that only include Him occasionally, and always in a very safe and ceremonial way, always at a distance – maybe at holidays and funerals, but never center-stage in daily life.

You see, here's the absolute truth of the matter: to varying degrees, all of us want to be the king or queen of our own lives and each of us feel a little threatened at times by the idea of some other sovereign – especially one sent by God Himself.

So, Herod turned to the religious leaders of his day and asked them, what has God said about all of this?

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

*6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"*

God had said many times, through many people, at many points in history – I will send a Savior, He will be born of a virgin, He will be born in Bethlehem and He gave many other details as well. He never said the exact date, He never said the exact mother, but He said all of this would happen, and now it is. God has sent His son, a ruler, to shepherd His people.

God is on the move and now people have to decide how they will respond. Here's what Herod does.

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Now picture this if you will - on the one hand you have a group of wise men who saw a star in the sky, a surprising, unexpected star and they, like Mary and Joseph, are willing to follow it across the desert just to see what's happening and where it goes – to see what God is doing, because they clearly and convincingly believed, God was at work.

Meanwhile, Herod won't even travel across town to see what's unfolding and his next move, if you read a little further down in verse 16, will be to order the death of all the young boys in this town in a maniacal, murderous attempt to guard his own position.

Do you see the contrast between the lives of people who are willing to discover what God wants to do and someone who wants to guard what they've already got going? God has suddenly, unexpectedly, surprisingly shown up in each of their lives, but only some are willing to follow.

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

People of Northern Virginia, don't miss this: these men of great stature, men of privilege and power and position, fell down and worshipped and surrendered their gifts to God. Because they were willing to follow God's surprising star, they saw something that changed their lives forever and they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

I hope and pray that the same could be true of each of us. I don't know what your starting point for the journey is - your life might be a mess right now. It might be full of pain and disappointment, but you too can be surprised by joy, exceedingly great joy, if you will let God lead you to worship Jesus. You don't have a star to follow, but you have all the promises found in Scripture. You have the Holy Spirit guiding you. You have the church around you. God has a direction for your life, and it's always leading toward Jesus. Follow Him. For your own good and because He is worthy, follow Him. And along the way may He fill you with joy, exceedingly great joy that cannot be found anywhere else.

Well, we've only scratched the surface here, we don't have time to get into Luke's version of these events - but he tells us how, before any of these things happened, God showed up to surprise Zechariah and Elizabeth with news of another unexpected pregnancy: they would have a child who would grow up to be known as John the Baptist, who would capture people's attention and point them to the coming Christ.

Luke also tells us that God wasn't just interested in kings and wisemen, angels surprised shepherds with good tidings of great joy because a child had been born, who is Christ the Lord - the long-awaited Savior, the Messiah - and He could be found wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And then, even more angels showed up singing -

Luke 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

God showed up, unannounced, unexpected, on an ordinary night in the lives of ordinary people. He surprised them with good news so they went to Bethlehem to see what was going on. And because they didn't resist it or explain it away, but simply let God lead them and looked into what He was doing, they too got to see something they would remember for the rest of their lives.

There were many surprising events associated with Jesus' birth, and as He grew up the surprises just continued. He would regularly show up unexpected and completely turn people's lives upside down - or we could say, turn them right side up. Because when God shows up in your life, it is always to do you good, to call you to something good, it might start by calling you away from something, but it's also, always a call for you to come closer to Him.

That's what Christmas is all about – Christmas is about God surprising us with the gift of His love, the gift of His presence in our life. The gift of Immanuel, God with us.

But Christmas is just the beginning. You see, this baby, born in a manger, grew up to be the sacrificial lamb of Easter, whom God then raised from the dead. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, to Joseph and Mary, and lived a perfect life – He never did anything wrong to anyone, never said anything wrong, never hurt anyone, all He ever did was pleasing to God and loving to people.

He lived the morally perfect life that we might dream of, but could never achieve, because we've already ruined it. We've all tried hard to change, and not been able to transform. We've all tried hard to be good, and only lasted so long. We've all had moments we're not proud of when we were less than what we hoped to be. None of us are perfect. And the Bible calls those imperfections sin.

Jesus had none of them.

And yet, many people rejected him. Some were excited about His surprises; some were happy to follow Him and find out what God was up to. But others were not. They schemed and they plotted, they looked out for themselves. They conspired to put a perfect, holy, and innocent, Jesus to death.

Of course, God had another surprise in store – He raised Jesus from the dead and drew Him back to Heaven where He sits on an eternal throne praying for everyone who loves and follows Him waiting for the day when He'll make another surprise visit to earth to bring a final judgment.

Yes, God is full of surprises – shocking, unexpected, unforeseen surprises – and they're on full display at Christmas.

But that doesn't mean He is unpredictable. Actually, He is unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). And that means the God who surprised people at the first Christmas is still interrupting lives today. He is still taking people who already had plans and inviting them into something new, something they didn't see coming, or at least never imagined could happen to them.

This Christmas I want you to realize that God used a young woman and her fiancé to shake the world. She had never been married before, had no experience as a mom, *and God used her anyway*. Joseph didn't grow up planning for any of *this*. He was busy thinking practically, like most other men: what do I need to do next at work, for the wedding, and to get us ready for the big trip to Bethlehem?

Shepherds were the lower-class people of their day, blue-collar workers, normal folk watching over normal flocks, just doing daily life. They may have prayed to God, but they never expected to see Him in the flesh or listen to a chorus of angels.

Later, Jesus would surround himself with government contractors like tax collectors, and small businessmen working as fishermen – ordinary people - and He would use them in extraordinary ways. He would surprise them by calling them to be part of something He was doing.

So don't be too shocked when God shows up in your life, expect the unexpected. It is supernaturally normal for God to call you, move you, and guide you into His plans and purposes.

But let's be honest, sometimes God does things that bring us to a crisis point – we have to think it through because, this isn't what I had planned, this isn't how I thought things would work out, I never thought that I would be the kind of person who... and you fill in the blank – but suddenly it seems like God has shown up, it seems like He is at work, it seems like there's more going on here and you just can't shake it. You're at a crisis point and it's going to take faith and courage to respond.

Well, look at the Christmas story – look at what happened to those who were willing to submit and surrender control of their lives to God.

And, look around you, this room is full of people who can tell you similar stories, things in the past, things happening right now, or things they see on the horizon – all stories of how their life has changed because God suddenly and surprisingly showed up. Stories of how the baby that was born in Bethlehem has become Lord of their life, Master of their schedules, the comfort they turn to in difficult times, their source of hope, peace, joy, and forgiveness – they can tell you how the presence of God in your life is the greatest present you can ever receive.

Maybe you need to receive that present this Christmas.

If so, just ask. The Bible tells us God is a good Father who wants to give good gifts. Prayer doesn't involve secret words, or languages or codes – just talk to God like a kid talks to their parents at Christmas and tell Him what you want. Say something like, "God, I want to be surprised by You, I want to give my life to You, I want more of You in my life; forgive me for everything I've ever done wrong, and use me for whatever You see fit, in Jesus' name, amen."

If you pray a prayer like that, God will hear you. And your life will change. It might change suddenly and in massive ways, or it might be smaller changes that unfold gradually – He did something different with Mary than He did with the Shepherds. He did something different with Joseph than He did with the wise men. But I guarantee you this, absolutely, positively, undeniably guarantee you this – God is looking for people who are available to Him and if you make yourself available, He will use you.

For those of us who already know Jesus, may Christmas be a time when we continue to make ourselves increasingly available to God – to be His ambassadors at the parties and gatherings we attend and in the homes we visit, to see the needs He wants us to meet, to

give the gifts He wants us to give, and to ask as we receive gifts, Father, how do You want me to use these new things, as we present ourselves to Him for His use in the coming year.

May Christmas remind us that God is at work, that He is the light of the world, that He is Immanuel, God with us. And He's still showing up in surprising ways in the lives of men and women, boys and girls, people just like you and me. He's working for our good, calling us to His side, and coming down to us, so let us take great delight in responding to Him.

Let's pray.



Advent 2022

How Christmas Began

Summary: The first Christmas was full of shocking, unexpected, unforeseen, surprises.

- How has this season of Advent helped you focus on the coming and second coming of Christ? Has there been anything different this year?
 - Is there anything else you do to help keep your heart focused on Christ at Christmas?
- What surprises you about God? (Focus just on Him – His nature and His works throughout time, the next question is about what surprising things He has done in your life.)
- God showed up the first Christmas in surprising ways and turned people's lives upside down. How has God surprised you in life, where and how has He turned your life upside down?
 - What was your initial reaction? How did you learn to respond? What do you think now, looking back?
- Mary and Joseph had two different experiences of the same event. Mary had to accept what God was doing in her, Joseph had to accept what God was doing in someone else and how that affected him.
 - How are these two experiences different?
 - When have you had to be Joseph and accept what God is doing in someone else you're connected to and love? Was it hard or easy? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about God?
- Both Herod and the wisemen enter the story with position and possessions, but while the wisemen are looking to worship by giving gifts, Herod is worried about what He might lose. How do you see both of the reactions to Jesus play out today?