

**Surprised by Joy**  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Morning Worship  
December 24, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005  
Gates Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Ralph S. English

Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:39-55

Surprises! How we love them – well, some of them.

Last year's Christmas not-so-welcome surprise was the idea of an upside down Christmas tree. The theory was that one could put more gifts under a tree whose top was wide and whose bottom was just a point. I claimed an upside down tree was antithetical to one of the justifications for a tree as a symbol of Christianity whose upward sweep points us upward to God and the heavens for the good news which is ours in the gift of Jesus Christ. This year, the idea of an upside down Christmas tree came to mind as the men struggled with this sanctuary tree's hundreds of pounds. Can you imagine their reaction had I suggested it be put upside down? The rope broke when the weight was at the bottom!

With the commercial world once again dictating the timing if not the reason for the Christmas season, getting it all backwards – as today is the end of Advent and tomorrow the first of the twelve days of Christmas – all we needed was for the *church* to confuse the message. While it may have been well meaning, the “Blue Christmas Service” held in Richmond, Virginia this past week turned the good news of the Gospel upside down. We of Gates Presbyterian Church recognize and acknowledge the hurt and pain some experience in this season – and how the world is still in desperate want of the ways of peace, grace and reconciliation. Indeed, some of our Advent hymns are more somber than those celebratory ones of Christmas Eve and the Christmas Season, ... but the news of Jesus Christ is *always* good news. The “Blue Christmas Service” held this last week was entirely and intentionally somber and melancholy – taking an embrace of the world's hurts one extra step and making it liturgical, making hurt, pain, suffering and loss *central* to the message. Even on Good Friday, when we emphasize the hurt, pain, suffering, loss and death of Jesus the Christ, the central part of the message is Christ's death *for us and our redemption* – and *that*, my friends, even on Good Friday, is good news. Hence the word “Good” on an otherwise somber day!

So, while we are not going to pretend that one can take the circumstances of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, civil strife *among* Palestinians and Sudanese, air strikes yesterday by the Ethiopian Air Force on Islamic held towns in Somalia, ... hunger, want, economic disparity, sickness and illness, the death of loved ones – we aren't going to pretend we can wrap any if not all of the world's ills in pretty wrapping paper and make the problems go away. We *are* going to say that God comes to us, continually comes to us, with the greatest of surprises – in the Word made Flesh Jesus the Christ – and that the Word is, was, and always will be one of joy!

Scripture is full of God's surprises! The words we read from the Book of Micah this morning included a surprise, the prophecy that a ruler of Israel would come from among the peoples of one of the smallest clans of Judah, namely Bethlehem Ephrathah. With the hindsight born of

history, we know that Jesus was born in the city of David, Bethlehem – but for the people of Israel and Judea, Bethlehem was a backwater town, certainly not among as significant as were the cities of Jerusalem, Samaria, Jericho, Bethel.

Lest we forget, the fact that the prophet Samuel anointed David to be the next King was itself a *surprise*. First, there was already a king, Saul, who didn't realize he was about to be replaced. Second, David was the youngest, keeper-of-the-sheep, son of a relatively unknown man named Jesse. So it is, that even though the powerful and renowned king David had hailed from Bethlehem, for that to happen again, for Bethlehem to be the source of two great leaders – well that would be like someone today hitting a multi-million dollar jackpot twice.

One of the biggest surprises, of course, came to a young girl named Mary – in the “backwater” town of Nazareth. Her somewhat tempered joy still included a realization that God is full of surprises, but we are to find joy in her full acceptance of her significant role in human history. Although we do not elevate her to near divine status as do those of some Christian traditions, that Mary carried and gave birth to the Word made flesh, Jesus, merits our awe. It would and should inspire us.

While we might express surprise – indeed with *joy* – that God still fills us with an amazing grace and embraces us with unending love – despite all our individual and mutual missteps – there is an important message for us to hear as we gather in the last hours of the Season of Advent: that Mary gave birth to the baby Jesus so long ago is only part of the message. Surprise! God wants Jesus to be born again and anew – and the bearer of that Word made flesh, the ones who would give birth to the gift of Christ to a broken and hurting world? That would be we – you, I, all of us who claim the Christ and know, in the depths of our souls, the joy that is ours from God because of that Gift so long ago born in a manger in Bethlehem. And, if that message is indeed one of joy, then it should come as *no* surprise that we are expected, commissioned, challenged to offer that, birth that, share that *good news* with others.

A Christmas hymn begins with “In the bleak midwinter, ...” While some people get caught up in a debate of whether Jesus was actually born in mid-winter, that is not the primary message of this hymn. Be it a “winter of our discontent” (Shakespeare's words from King Richard III) ... be it the “winter of our discontent” or a season of despair or the “worst of times” or a time of loss, absence, illness, hospitalization, even the approach of death .... in the bleakest of times comes a *surprise!* And that surprise, born in a humble manger and born again in the humblest of hearts, is always, *always* one of joy! At the end of the second stanza of that hymn comes the crux of the gift of joy, promised in Advent and fulfilled in Christmas:

In the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed  
The LORD God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

And our response? OK, so our joy might be tempered by some harsher realities in life – but, God willing, we will still be surprised by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that is ours in the gift of Christ at Christmas – and as we sing in conclusion to our offertory,

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart.

Be surprised in these closing hours of Advent! Be surprised by the promise and fulfillment of grace – *especially* in the context of all that seems to go wrong with humanity! But, don't be surprised that God asked a girl to give birth to the Christ Child in a little town called Bethlehem in a seemingly bleak "backwater" time of history. And don't be surprised by the joy that is ours when we do as God asks us – bear the Word from this place and from the depths of our hearts, to the peoples of our communities and the peoples of the world who so desperately need good news and need to be surprised by the gift of joy!

Good news! Good news! Christ comes to save all who believe in Him! If there is a somber surprise, it is that the message of good news still needs to be heard and believed. But the joyful surprise is that God continues to offer that grace – and in the gift of Christmas, that is exactly what we receive.

Be filled with the grace and hope that is ours in Christ. In these closing hours of Advent, ... be surprised by joy!

Amen.