

Joseph's Surprise
Christmas Surprise Week 1
November 28, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

Hope you had a great Thanksgiving!

This is week 1 of a series we're calling Christmas Surprise

Nobody was ready for that first Christmas, it came as a surprise to everyone,

And we're going to spend these next few weeks preparing for Christmas by looking at a few different characters in the biblical story

and watching how they navigated the surprises that God had for each of them that came with that first Christmas

And what we're going to see as we look at these stories is that the surprises given from God that came that first Christmas were like most Christmas surprises--good gifts and good surprises!

But at the same time, as we're going to see today, for many of them, their Christmas surprise came with consequences or ramifications that affected them emotionally, socially, relationally, and/or vocationally

Some of us are getting ready to head into a Christmas season after a fall or maybe even a whole year of surprises.

And maybe some of those surprises were welcomed and others not so much, maybe some of those surprises came with pain or a cost

This December, we're going to watch as God moved in that first Christmas in very ordinary people's lives who are living in a weary and fractured and fragmented and contentious world to bring all kinds of first Christmas surprises

And we'll ask him to meet us here today, ordinary people, in our contentious and fractured and weary world

And I'm hoping for 2 things over the course of this series:

First, whether you've heard this story a million times or this is your first time ever really digging into the Christmas story

that all of us will be able to enter into the wonderful surprise of that first Christmas and all its implications

And secondly, I'm hoping that for those of us who are struggling with our own surprises from 2016 that have had put unwelcomed or unexpected stressors on you

Whether those are physical, financial, emotional, spiritual or relational, that you might find comfort this Christmas in the God who loves to surprise us with his grace and mercy and his power to redeem all things and work in all types of situations, even the unpleasant surprises

So if you've got a Bible turn with me to Matthew 1, if you're new to the Bible, there are 4 biographies of Jesus, we call those the gospels

Matthew is one of those biographies and he starts his account in Matthew 1 with a genealogy which mostly church people tend to skim over but if you dig into it, it's AWESOME

Maybe sometime we'll camp out in the genealogy of Jesus and 3 of you will be excited about that

But after this genealogy, Matthew goes on to tell Joseph's story, who is Jesus's dad.

We'll look at Joseph this week and then next week we'll be looking at Mary and the week after we'll be looking at Elizabeth, who is Jesus's aunt—so ladies, don't worry, you'll be getting your due

But here's what Matthew says starting in v. 18 about Joseph:

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

My wife Kelly and I were very committed Jesus-followers before we were married

it was the main thing in both of our lives individually and we were committed to following Jesus in our relationship

And so we were committed to following the scripture's teaching about sex and to waiting until we were married

Easily one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my entire life!

If you're not or weren't a Jesus follower, I don't expect that you would have followed this very difficult command from Scripture

It is good, it is wise, there are great reasons for it, and I think in following it there is good fruit in our lives

but it's easily one of the top 2-3 most difficult teachings in the entire Bible and if you were not taking Jesus seriously when you were dating, I don't expect that you'd pick this one command out of the Bible to follow while disregarding the rest!

So let's say hypothetically, this didn't happen, but let's say that Kelly and I are engaged, and we're putting all this effort into not sleeping together before we get married

And THEN, a month or two before the wedding, I find out that she's pregnant

I don't know if I can express how deeply angry, betrayed and upset I would be—my little world would have been turned completely upside down and shattered

This is something of what happened to Joseph. He finds out mid-engagement, before they've come together, that Mary is pregnant

THIS Is Joseph's Christmas surprise! Merry Christmas, Joseph!

Mary is pregnant, he's not the father, this was likely an arranged marriage and so there's families involved and it's a public disgrace in a small town

and in ancient Palestine you just DIDN'T do this—it was shameful, appalling!

Imagine the Thanksgiving conversation around the table with your pregnant fiancé sitting next to you!

Your parents, her parents, going to the local synagogue, out in the marketplace, everyone knows you and Mary and knows she's pregnant and y'all aren't married yet. Socially disastrous, shame everywhere

In terms of the public relations side of things, Joseph has one of two choices: either he endures the scorn of his neighbors who would all most naturally think that they slept together before they were married and this baby is his

OR Joseph in this culture at this time has the authority to do all sorts of things to heap ALL of that shame upon Mary, to publicly humiliate Mary as retribution for what he thinks she's done

And yet what does the Scripture say he has in mind to do? He was going to break off the engagement quietly--why? Because he didn't want to put her to public disgrace

Joseph appears to have just been humiliated by his fiancée and there's likely all these feelings of anger and betrayal

And yet whose concerns does he put first? Mary's.

Joseph fights through all of the noise and static inside of his own head: his own hurt feelings, all of his own anger and feelings of betrayal

And he puts Mary first.

How good are you at doing that? Me neither!

When I'm hurt or angry or frustrated, whose feelings am I most aware of? Mine! And yet, here's Joseph, and amidst all that same swirl of emotions, whose feelings is he aware of? Hers.

Joseph's Christmas surprise is not a welcome one initially. Mary's pregnant: surprise!

This surprise that he's getting has consequences and ramifications for him personally and for his family and it looks like it's going to totally undermine his future

And yet even as his future falls apart at this news that Mary's pregnant, he responds with character and dignity and a generous heart

Do you know when your character and my character are most naturally and most fully on display? When we're offended, shocked, and/or hurt. That's when.

Crisis or pain strips us of pretense and strips of externals and shows us what's underneath.

What does this crisis or pain show us about Joseph?

We've been talking about being generous-hearted people these last five weeks, Joseph is about as wonderful a biblical picture of a generous hearted man as there is

My friends, for some of you, you've received unwelcomed surprises over in 2016, maybe some major ones, maybe just a couple of minor ones like I have.

And a question that might be good to wrestle with:

What have my responses to unwelcomed and unwanted surprises revealed about my character?

We need to ask this in an honest but gentle and gracious way: What have I seen about myself in how I've responded to some of those unwanted surprises that needs to change, mature, grow?

This requires spiritual growth, this requires going to God and confessing that there's a gap, a gulf between who I am currently and who God made for me to be and calls for me to be

And I need a power and a strength bigger than myself to close that gap. I need resources that are more reliable than my own good intentions

Because in my own strength, I will consistently fall short of the character that we see here in Joseph

Joseph's Christmas surprise is initially unwelcome on so many levels, but God is at work in this and he's got plans that he's going to bring Joseph up to speed on

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."

Have you ever read about those studies they run where they get a group of people, and a few of them or maybe most of them know that they're involved in some sort of an experiment

But a few of them DON'T know that they're being watched or that this whole thing is an experiment on them?

I always feel a little bit like the people who don't know that they're being studied kind of get the short end of the stick!

Next week, we're going to look at Mary's experience of the Christmas surprise, but let's go ahead and engage in a little bit of a corporate spoiler alert

Mary is ALSO going to get a heads up from an angel about this baby, but when does Mary get the angel visitation, was it before or after she finds out she's pregnant?

Mary gets the angel visitation BEFORE the baby comes, she gets a heads up ahead of time that God's going to giving her a baby that she has nothing to do with conceiving

Now, of course, the mom experience is very different when it comes to babies and of COURSE Mary deserved a heads up ahead of time

But what happens here with Joseph is very similar to most of us—Joseph doesn't get the angelic explanation until AFTER the unwelcomed surprise has hit.

And for us, SOMETIMES we have an inkling of an unexpected and maybe unwanted surprise that's on the way—maybe you knew that they were getting ready to downsize and that your job was likely to get cut

But most often, we get the experience of the unwanted surprise FIRST
and then we enter into some period of time of confusion, sometimes it's a LONG time of confusion, trying to understand and make sense of what's happened to us
and if we're Jesus-following-people, we might be asking "Jesus, what was that all about? How am I supposed to understand or interpret what's just happened to me? Are you at work in all of this somehow or am I just kind of adrift here?"

Any of you ever ask those kinds of questions before? Any of you asking them right now?

And the truth of the matter is, sometimes we NEVER get an answer. This isn't a sit-com. Life doesn't all end in nice neat bows with total resolution in 28 minutes

So that's true. But there's something else that's also true that's on display here.

And that is that very often, even in the midst of situations that you cannot fathom how God might be doing something, he is.

Even if your fiancée is pregnant and you know it wasn't you and there's an obvious but painful explanation,

EVEN THEN God might do something that you can't account for or understand or could have never anticipated or guessed, not in a thousand lifetimes.

And sometimes, not always, he'll reveal it to you. He'll explain it to you. Or it will over time become clear what God was up to even in the darkest season of your life

And so this morning, as we look at Joseph's story and see the angel of the Lord interpreting God's activity and explaining what God's up to in the aftermath of a very unwelcome first-Christmas surprise

I want to invite you to ask for God to help you to understand any unwanted or unpleasant surprises you've had this past year.

Some of you've been asking and asking and asking for God to help you make sense of something and maybe no clear answer is coming.

But maybe, this morning, there's an invitation from Joseph to ask one more time

Maybe you're being invited to ask for understanding and interpretation over these next few weeks for Christmas

and then, after that, if there's no clear answer, then maybe you relent, you submit, you leave it at the feet of Jesus and move on

and trust that either he'll give you clarity or he won't, but you've submitted your request to God and now are trusting God with it no matter what

But just maybe there's an invitation for a few of us to ask for understanding or explanation to some unwanted surprise, or to ask for some sign of God's redemption of something difficult

Joseph here gets the explanation AFTER the unwelcomed surprise

But the answer he gets, the information that he gets in this conversation with this angel is perhaps the single most contested, the single most debated and disputed claim in all of history

what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."

This is the single most debated claim in all of history. Period.

More ink and hours have been spent arguing, disputing and defending this claim in history than anything else in all of history, election 2016 will come and go, this debate will continue to rage on and on

Because no other religion, no other philosophy has ever made this claim

No one before or since has ever claimed that God himself is putting on flesh and moving into the neighborhood

Jesus simply means “God Saves” and it was a common name in ancient Israel, we’ve got several other Jesus’s on record, it’s the Greek form of Joshua

But the angel says that THIS particular Jesus is conceived by God’s Spirit directly, no human intervention

IN ORDER THAT God himself might save his people from their sins.

And here we get the great scandal and dividing line of Christmas.

Lots of people all around the world celebrate Christmas without any regard for the spiritual or faith aspects of it, bringing happiness to people all over the world

And as a Jesus-person, I see this simply as further evidence that the work of Jesus is true and good and right

Jesus said that his kingdom was like yeast that worked through the whole dough, causing EVERYTHING that it comes in contact with to rise, to be more robust and more alive

And nowhere is that more true than in the secular celebration of Christmas

our secular neighbors are experiencing the distant faint blessings of Jesus who has come to make his blessings known far as the curse of sin is found, far as the curse of sin is found

And so we here at CCC, we bless our secular, Jesus-hating neighbors to know the wonders and joy of Jesus’s Christmas

And we beg and we plead all of them to know that the joy of Christmas is NOTHING compared the wonders of what God has planned for his people for all eternity

One day of happiness? A couple weeks of expectations and glowing lights? That’s a pittance! That’s nothing! Some warm fuzzies for a few hours? You like that?

Then come in, come in, come in, there’s so, so, so much more!!

Our secular neighbors are just eating the crumbs that are falling off the table at the wedding feast of the King of the Universe

his name is Jesus, and he has come as God in the flesh to deliver us from our sins so that we might be with God forever and ever

In a joy that will never, ever end, not for all eternity.

The Scriptures declare that God himself has come in the person of Jesus, God in the flesh, to restore us into a relationship with God

And because this claim is so outlandish, and because no other religion or philosophy has ever made such a claim, people throughout history have done all sorts of things with this claim

One thing people have said is that it's all a myth or a fable, just make-believe like so many other stories of the gods in Greek mythology.

The problem with that, of course, is that it doesn't read like a myth, it's not written like a fable or a tall tale.

This isn't Zeus and Aphrodite having some sort of an affair, having an illegitimate child, and pawning him off on some poor unsuspecting human

Nor is it Jack in the beanstalk with a nameless parent. There's a genealogy right before this. I told you the genealogy was awesome!

And one of the reasons why it's awesome is because it's grounding this story in history, an event that happened in real time and space

And the genealogy ends with real people, in a real town, in a real difficult situation.

This is nothing like a myth or a fable or a tall tale—they had LOTS of those floating around the culture in that time

Myths were attempts to explain a mysterious universe through arbitrary and fickle deities at work and at play and behaving badly. Fables were just basically made up stories to communicate values or life skills

THIS is history. This is not good advice, this is good NEWS that demands a response, that demands that we do something with it, that we account for it in some way, that we wrestle with its claims and all the implications for our lives

This written like it actually happened, with concrete dates and details that are recorded with men and women who were alive to either verify or contest the veracity of the account

We can't just dismiss this as some sort of a tall tale, because it's nothing like a tall tale. It's news that demands a response from each one of us.

The second thing that people throughout history have done with this story is call it a cover-up. "C'mon, we all know how babies get born

Mary and Joseph really got pregnant BEFORE they were married, it's a great scandal, everyone knew about it

And he turned out to be a great teacher, so they had to go back and make up some sort of a divine origin story to legitimize his work"

And in this line of thinking, we get the "Jesus was just a great, nice teacher, but he's not REALLY God in the flesh" line of thinking

But as C.S. Lewis argues in his book *Mere Christianity*, the problem with Jesus as a great moral teacher line of thinking is that he says too many crazy things!

He makes all kinds of claims about himself that are not neutral—he himself claims to be God in the flesh

We cannot simply pick and choose which parts of the Jesus story we like and don't like because every single thing recorded in the rest of the Jesus story is written to confirm what the angel says here.

Like your best term paper in school, this is the thesis: this man was conceived by God's Spirit, and everything else written about him from his teaching to his miracles to especially the cross and the resurrection on Easter Sunday

All of that is written as supporting evidence to confirm the word of the angel to Joseph here in this passage:

that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that literally he is of divine and not human origin

And that he is God himself come to deliver us from our biggest problem with his best possible gift

And this, of course, is part of why we struggle with this part of the story. One of my favorite authors is a pastor named Tim Keller and he points out that some gifts require that we swallow our pride to accept them gratefully

If your spouse gives you a book this Christmas on weight-loss, that's a gift that would require humility to accept gratefully and put into practice—"gee thanks, DEAR."

God's gift of Jesus to us requires humility in order for us to accept him gratefully because this gift is given to us to heal our fatal flaw.

And in this gift, God is saying that our biggest problems aren't someone else: it's not our neighbor or our boss or our spouse or our ex-spouse or the system that's rigged against us

The Scriptures are telling us that God has acted on our behalf to address our biggest problem and it's saying that our biggest problem is our own sin

To say that my biggest challenges to my own flourishing and wholeness and ultimately to reconciliation with a perfect God are not all outside of me, out there somewhere, but inside of me, in here

That's a gift that requires humility to receive

But this is exactly what the angel of the Lord announced to Joseph 2,000 years ago and it is what is on offer to you and to me today, here and now

And for the past 2,000 years, whenever people have humbled themselves enough to receive this gift, it has turned darkness into light

It has relieved them of guilt and shame
It has released them to serve and love others
It has empowered them to endure tremendous heart-ache and hardship

Because this gift is the path to reconciliation with the God of the universe who loves us and who came to earth to deliver us from our greatest threat to our eternal destinies forever and ever

And if we will but accept this gift, it can and does change everything.

Joseph has this same choice to make, let's give him the last word before we close:

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. [Simple, wonderful obedience isn't it? In my small group this past week we were saying that we'd wake up and say to some friends, "Guys, you're never going to believe this dream I had!" I might plan a nap for later that afternoon and ask God for a confirmation dream, just to make sure!] ***²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.***

A couple of Take-WITH's this morning—wildly important take-homes for us to ponder this week as we look at this passage

First, to pick up the question from earlier:

1. What has my responses to unwelcomed surprises revealed about my character in 2016?

Again, I want to encourage you to ask this question gently to yourself, but honestly.

And I want to invite you to consider that the honest self-assessment of our hearts is a gift because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross

Hear the good news this morning: the angel was right!

Jesus was sent to earth to forgive whatever it is that got exposed in your character and my character in those unwelcomed surprises

It is the cross of Christ, who has forgiven all of our sins, just like the angel said he would,

And that frees us to be brutally honest about our selfishness, our dishonesty, our self-righteousness, whatever it was that was exposed

To know that we are forgiven of our sins, to receive Christ's forgiveness and to move forward into our lives as forgiven and reconciled men and women, filled with God's Spirit

this is the great comfort and the great power of the Christian faith

But there is a bit of work required on our part, which is that we are honest about where those gaps are in our character, confessing those before the Lord, and asking for his forgiveness and grace to be applied in those areas and to bring transformation and new life into us

2. Is there an unwelcome surprise that you need help to understand from this past year?

Maybe for these next few weeks, you're going to put this on the top of your Christmas list to submit to God. "God, what I want for Christmas is some sense of how you're working in the midst of this thing that happened that I don't understand."

If you don't get any more clarity, then you leave it at Jesus's feet, entrusting yourself and your unwelcomed surprise all over to him, and move on—perhaps he'll reveal it to you in due time

But just maybe through Joseph he's inviting you into one more season of asking, seeking and knocking.

3. What do you do with the news of Jesus, conceived by God's Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of our sins?

We've got a good number of people here who aren't sure what they think of all of this. Thank you for being here, you honor us with your presence, we're grateful for you.

All of the Christian faith turns on this claim. And this morning, as we look ahead to Christmas, I want to invite you to consider the central tenant of the Christian faith.

And to wrestle with and maybe even pray about whether or not this news could possibly be true. And if it is true, what it could mean for you and for our weary and divided world

Nobody was ready for that first Christmas—came as a surprise to everyone. This Christmas, I want to invite all of us into the wonder of the surprising grace of God, who has sent his Son to rescue us from our sin.

PRAY