

WELCOME

Around this time of year (many of you are probably used to it by now) people read a story about the birth of Jesus. Now, I've heard this story several times (because I've had a lot of Christmases to listen to it). Maybe you have, too. But, you know, I never get tired of it. The same story I've heard many times before is one I still enjoy hearing—over and over again.

One of the things that amazes me each Christmas is how I continue to discover things I'd never noticed before, in a story I know well. Good stories are like that. They can feel new and surprise us—even when we know what's going to happen. I wonder what I'll notice about the Christmas story this year. I wonder what you'll notice.

Let's listen.

STORY 1: THE ANNUNCIATION

Luke 1:26-38 (CEV)

God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you."

Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end."

Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!"

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her.

'Surprise'

Are you ticklish?

Here's something to try. Grab someone in your house, and get them to take off their shoes and socks. Then, with something soft like a feather or a leaf, gently brush the bottom of their feet. You can try just using a light touch with

your fingers, too, like a little bug running fast. How long can the other person stand it? Is impossible not to jump?

Now, try doing the same thing on your own feet. Do you have a similar reaction? Do you think it tickles as much as it did the person you did it to?

It's funny, but most people find they can't tickle themselves. Only another person can. Why do you think that is? Why does it only tickle when someone else does it?

Perhaps it's the element of surprise. When it's our own hand, our brain anticipates and prepares. When you *don't expect* it, someone's surprise touch catches you off guard. But even if you *do* know what's going to happen, just the anticipation can cause you to giggle. Some people are so ticklish they begin laughing even before anything has made contact with their skin.

Our brain is in a constant state of trying to predict what's about to happen next. Surprises shock us and cause us to react quickly. Our reaction to surprises is our brain's way of getting us to **pay attention**.

In the Bible, we read of several times people get surprised. We just heard about one of the most famous ones.

I wonder if today we might think about the surprises at Christmas. (It's a time when a lot of them occur.) Because God—often through unusual and unexpected ways—is trying to get us to pay attention ... and tell us something wonderful.

Gabriel's Message

S. Baring-Gould
Old Basque Noël

Prayer

O God, come to us this Christmastime and surprise us. May we be filled with a wonder that reveals more about you. Burst in on our lives. Make us say, 'Wow!' In the name of your astounding gift, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

STORY 2: THE BIRTH

Luke 2:1-7 (CEV)

About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books. These first records were made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone had to go to their own hometown to be listed. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago Bethlehem had been King David's hometown, and Joseph went there because he was from David's family.

Mary was engaged to Joseph and travelled with him to Bethlehem. She was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her first-born son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Who sleeps where?

I've got some pictures I want to show you. Some are pictures of houses and some are pictures of people or animals that go inside those houses. See if you can match up the person or animal with the place it sleeps.

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Okay, so this is how things are *supposed* to be. A horse sleeps in a barn, and a bird lives in a nest. But what we've heard today is a story that didn't turn out the way we might have expected. Remember, the angel told Mary that Jesus was a king—a person who would have a kingdom. And kings with kingdoms, of course, sleep in castles—not barns.

What do you think a king sleeping in a barn means? That he lost his kingdom? That he's not a very special person anymore? Is he unlucky?

If Jesus is God's son, why would someone important like that live the first part of his life in a cowshed? Important people have nice houses, right? A good person like Jesus deserves good things. Isn't that the way it goes?

One of the things Jesus' sleeping in a stable might give us is a new take on where good people belong. And this story might change our minds about who we think God finds special or about the kinds of places that we—the people of the world—find for God.

'There Wasn't Any Room At The Inn'

Michael Forster

Christopher Tambling

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us welcome you into our world with joy. Make special all kinds of places—both palaces and barns. Bless all those who have, like you, no proper place to sleep this night and inspire us to build a world where all can find rest and safety.

Amen.

STORY 3: THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8-20 (CEV)

That night in the fields near Bethlehem some shepherds were guarding their sheep. All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord's glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. This very day in King David's hometown a Saviour was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay."

Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God. They said:

"Praise God in heaven!
Peace on earth to everyone
who pleases God."

After the angels had left and gone back to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has told us about." They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and they saw the baby lying on a bed of hay.

When the shepherds saw Jesus, they told his parents what the angel had said about him. Everyone listened and was surprised. But Mary kept thinking about all this and wondering what it meant.

As the shepherds returned to their sheep, they were praising God and saying wonderful things about him. Everything they had seen and heard was just as the angel had said.

Signs

I've got some signs here. See if you can tell me what they mean.

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Now, I have a question. Thinking about the signs we know—the ones that try to show us something—what do you think a sign that indicates 'God is Here' would look like?

Perhaps a cross? Or a fish? Or maybe a steeple?

In terms of signs from God, there are probably ones we'd expect—like bright lights or heavenly music—and signs we might not. The angels told the shepherds of a sign—how they'd know they'd found the *right* baby—the child would be lying in a bed of hay.

Sometimes God's signs are big and bold, but other times they're small and mysterious. We can't just notice the obvious ones. As people looking for God, we might have to look a bit more carefully. Some signs may be concealed. Some signs might require a bit of investigation.

So, this Christmas, keep an eye out for signs that point to God. And when you discover one, follow it. See where it leads.

Just Another Star

Carol Barratt
Karl Jenkins

Prayer

O wonderful sign of God, Jesus Christ, point us toward the way that leads to you. Give us encouragement and patience. Help us to listen carefully and to watch out, that we don't miss knowing where you are and what you want us to do.

Amen.

STORY 4: THE WISE MEN

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEV)

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and said,

“Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard about this, he was worried, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, “Where will the Messiah be born?”

They told him, “He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote,

‘Bethlehem in the land
of Judea,
you are very important
among the towns of Judea.
From your town
will come a leader,
who will be like a shepherd
for my people Israel.’”

Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too.”

The wise men listened to what the king said and then left. And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were thrilled and excited to see the star.

When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him. They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and gave them to him. Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

What gifts say

Why do we exchange presents at Christmastime? What do the gifts we give mean?

Gifts like the wise men’s—gold and expensive perfume—say, ‘You are special.’ They’re extraordinary, and they show just how extraordinary these wise gift-givers thought the baby Jesus was.

At Christmas, we give gifts that tell people how we feel about them and show them how special we think they are. But these are not always things you buy. Just because something costs a lot doesn’t mean it’s good. Sometimes the best gifts are free. Things like hugs, help cleaning up the house after dinner, and sharing a story can be the most wonderful gifts of the season. And they can communicate exactly how fabulous we think other people are.

By now, most people will tell you it’s too late to do anymore shopping—that, if you’ve not gotten someone a gift already, it’s too late. Maybe it’s too late to buy something, but it’s not too late to give someone a gift that shows how you feel.

What gifts do you want to give this Christmas? How will you show someone they’re special?

Zither Carol

Words by Michael Sargent
Czech Folk Tune

CONCLUSION

At Christmas, God appeared in unexpected ways and gave some strange signs. But things that are of God—that are true—sometimes are surprising. Sometimes they don't look like what we might expect.

May this season of the unexpected fill you with joy;
May the knowledge of God's willingness to travel to strange and distant places

fill you with hope

May the signs of God point you toward the way to go

And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you this day and always.

Amen.

Merry Christmas!