

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias. He had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they both were well advanced in years. 8 Now while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his division, his lot was to enter into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 11 An angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zacharias was troubled when he saw him... But the angel said to him, "Don't be afraid, Zacharias, because your request has been heard, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 You will have joy and gladness; and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord, their God. 17 He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to prepare a people prepared for the Lord.'" 18 Zacharias said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." 19 The angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. 20 Behold, you will be silent and not able to speak, until the day that these things will happen, because you didn't believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." After these days Elizabeth, his wife, conceived, and she hid herself five months, saying, 25 "Thus has the Lord done to me in the days in which he looked at me, to take away my reproach among men."*

Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah, 40 and entered into the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 She called out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Surprises are important in life. What if life only handed out exactly what we expected? Maybe not for you, but for me it would be a pretty boring life. I like to be surprised. A few years ago I noticed that was one way Vonna and I are different. When we were driving together, I would put in a CD and put the stereo on "random" so that I didn't know what song was coming next. Drove Vonna crazy. (Of course that isn't the only time I've driven her crazy).

Still, surprises are a part of life.

I heard that on Black Friday there was already a long line at a local store—and had been since midnight. The store was supposed to open at 0500. About 0445 a small man pushed his way to the front of the line—but he was pushed back by the people who had already been waiting for hours. The second time he pushed forward, he was punched in the nose by the guy at the front and pushed around as they shoved him to the back of the line again. Looking at the long line, he told the person in front of him, "that does it, if they hit me one more time, I'll go home and I won't open the store until noon!"

Most jokes rely on surprise—on an unexpected turn of words or events.

Surprise parties are great—David had one of those this year. Really, part of the appeal of a wrapped Christmas present is that what is inside is a surprise.

I think God likes surprises also—he sometimes seems to delight in giving us unexpected things or even showing us what we didn't know about him or our world in a surprising way, even using the world around us.

A rainbow is a pleasant surprise after a storm. At Christmas time, we are reminded that even how he sent the Messiah was a surprise. They were expecting a warrior and a king—but they got a baby.

Speaking of Christmas surprises from God, the story I read a little bit ago is full of surprises.

(1) The first surprise in those days was finding a priestly couple who was upright and blameless in the commandments and ordinances of God.

The priests were descendents of Aaron and I've read that there were around 20,000 of them at that time. They were the upper class and had a reputation for elitism and corruptness. They were “above” everyone else and it showed. If you remember, the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan passed by on the other side of the road—we presume it was because he was too important or too good to deal with a common person who was bloody and beaten and that is probably right.

And yet this couple was doing everything right. When I think about and talk about why someone is chosen—like Zac and Liz, or even Mary and Joseph, the idea that they were not specifically special comes to mind. The main idea that comes to my mind is that they didn't disqualify themselves. If this priestly couple had been like the others, God wouldn't—or couldn't—have used them.

As an aside, their names seem to be of surprising importance also. Zachariah's name means “the Lord remembers.” And Elizabeth's name means “the oath of God.” The meaning of their names would have unexpected significance.

(2) It is kind of small, but the second surprise was that God turned the system of retribution upside down (the belief that you always got what you deserved). Priestly class or not, Zac and Liz would have been somewhere down the path of being social outcasts because she was barren.

The whispers would have been that they had secret sin and that they had displeased God along the way. And yet that is not true.

(3) The third surprise of God in this story was the angel. Not only an angel of the Lord, but archangel Gabriel. Zachariah was doing his rotation in the temple and suddenly there was an angel. Don't know about you, but that would be an unexpected surprise to me.

And this was a double surprise. In Case Zac hadn't quite had a heart attack yet from seeing an angel, then the announcement probably put him close to the edge. Elizabeth was going to have a baby. After all the praying and pleading and after all the time and after all his faithfulness to his wife (he COULD have divorced her under their law, give some details).

I think his reaction was reasonable, don't you? The same as the people on the Antiques Roadshow. We KNOW that those guys NEVER kid when giving a value. But sure enough, some guy will bring in a chunk of rock with some scratching carved into it and the appraiser will say, "well, this is the finest example of pre-columbian art I've ever seen and it is worth at least a quarter-million dollars..." and the man will automatically say, "you are KIDDING me!"

HE was old and Elizabeth was old and they had prayed and prayed to no avail and had probably given up. I think that was why old Zach said, "how can I know this is true?" He was reacting in surprise.

(4) For me, another little surprise is Gabriel's reaction. Sometimes I think of heaven and heavenly things and God himself as being emotionless—and yet I know that is not really true. WE are created in God's image and WE have a full range of emotions, so we know they are good.

Still, if I think about it, I am a little surprised by old Gabriel's reaction. It seems like he was offended. "Look, old man, was sent by God himself. I am normally in his very presence and yet I took time out of my busy day to pop into your world here—in all my angelic glory—and bring you the best news you've had in years, and you QUESTION ME?"

(5) The fifth surprise is also a small one to us, but a big one to Zach. Gabriel cursed him with muteness. "Question me, will you? I'll fix it where you can't question anything for a while..." Again, I see Zach's response as a normal response, so I am surprised that Gabriel took offense and especially that he issued a curse—even a temporary one.

(6) There were no cell phones back then (I know you knew that—so that isn't one of our surprises today). But—even if he HAD HAD a cell phone to call Elizabeth and tell her about the promise of a son, he was mute—and he couldn't have could he?

But as soon as his rotation at the temple was over he went home and I'm sure he shared his experience with her. Soon after, she conceived and according to her words, the Lord took away her reproach. In spite of his experience, I'm guessing that it was still a surprise for Zachariah and certainly, having only her husband's word on it, it was a REAL surprise to Elizabeth. And yet it came to be that she was with child after all the year and all the disappointments.

(7) Another surprise in this story is one I have read over and over and yet hadn't really thought about. The angel Gabriel used this miracle—the miracle of Elizabeth being with child in her old age—to help convince Mary that what he was saying was true, that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah.

(8) The last surprise I want to mention is that when Mary went to stay with Elizabeth, John—the baby inside Elizabeth—leaped when he heard Mary's voice. Acknowledging Mary as special and important to God's plan for things to come.

I like the fact that God breaks into our lives when we least expect it. I like that God is a God of surprises.

If we look at this story, we may find ourselves.

Sometimes, when we are seeking to live our lives in God's will and by his rules. And when we commit to following God even when it isn't easy and when we don't understand what is going on in our lives. And when we are praying to God—in general but also for things that we want and desire and need in our lives. And when we know that what we desire is virtually impossible. And when we have heard the promises that are hard to believe.

Maybe it will do us good to remember Zachariah and Elizabeth. Sure they are a special part of the story of Jesus' birth. Sure they are important people in our Bible stories and in our Christmas celebration. BUT just like every other person we find in those Sunday School stories, they are people. People with doubts and weaknesses and people who struggle with God's will and God's desires for them. With life in general.

They were also like you and me in nearly every way—and that means that God can and will surprise us. Sometimes when we least expect it and in ways we'd never have imagined.

God did that when he called me into ministry. I was surprised—so were a lot of other people.

He did that in our coming here to Zion. I've told you before, but we'd been out of “church ministry” for more than 10 years. Vonna had a period of reflection and prayer and she came to me and said that she really missed being a part of a church and ministering to a church and community. That was the week we got two calls—from Zion and from Sharon.

I won't go into all the details, but later David Benckert and I were talking about the “coincidences” involved in all this and he said, “I know it's a God-thing.”

I pray God breaks into your lives also. I pray that he surprises you this Christmas season. I pray that he changes your lives. No matter if you are very young like Mary or too old like Zach and Elizabeth. It may not be convenient when he does—but it IS exciting...

May the God of Surprises delight you, inviting you to accept gifts not yet imagined. May the God of Transformation call you to renewal. May the God of Justice confront you, daring you to see the world through his eyes. May the God of Embrace hold you, encircling you in the arms of God. May the God of Hope bless you, encouraging you with the fruits of faith. May the God of Welcome invite you, drawing you nearer to the fullness of God in you. May God Who is Present be with you, awakening you to God in all things, all people, and all moments. May God be with you. Amen.