

“Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!”

November 30, 2025 -- Matthew 24: 36-44 -- Advent I
Dean Feldmeyer

“Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!”

Many of us can still remember television’s Jim Nabors as Private Gomer Pyle, USMC, his eyes closed, a broad smile creasing his face, weaving his head and shoulders back and forth as he said that phrase. Surprises always pleased Gomer. He accepted them as gifts.

Maybe that’s because Gomer was easy to surprise. He was naïve and kind of simple. His heart was pure and he always assumed the best in and expected the best from people. Even when people, or the world, for that matter, didn’t meet his expectations he was able to put a positive spin on it.

His foil, Sargent Vince Carter, on the other hand, never liked surprises. He liked order, neatness and predictability. He did everything in his power to prevent and avoid surprises – even the good ones.

So, consequently, he was never prepared for the surprises that life inevitably threw at him. And, with Gomer in his platoon, those surprises came fast and often.

The gospel lesson on this first Sunday in Advent calls us to channel our inner Gomer Pyle, to prepare ourselves for the greatest surprise of all so, on that day, we can receive and celebrate it as a gift.

VICISSITUDES

Allow me to introduce to you what may be a new word: vicissitudes.

Say it with me: vicissitudes. It’s a great word and one that I love to use because it’s an old word. George Washington used it in his first inaugural address. When I use it, it makes me feel smart.

Vicissitudes.

It means changes. In particular, it means the changes that happen in the normal course of events, the many and various changes that come through maturation or growth or development; changes that we should expect but somehow always manage to catch us by surprise.

The vicissitudes of aging, for instance, have made it harder for me to turn my head as far as I should when I’m backing my car out of a parking space. So, I have a dent on the right door. (I’ll come back to that in a minute.)

One of the reasons I write out more of my sermons in manuscript form is because my memory isn’t as crisp and clear as it used to be.

I have to work harder to take-off weight that is easier than ever to put on.

The vicissitudes of parenting required me to slap a smile on my face and stand on the porch waving when my kids moved out even though my heart was breaking. I had to learn to watch them make mistakes and then be there to help them up after they fell. I had to get used to being called pop.

Nothing we can do about it. Life is full of vicissitudes. Just look at evening news. It's raining. It's snowing. The sun is out and then it's gone. *Surprise!*

The Dow is up...no, it's down...no, it's up...wait, it's down again. *Surprise!* Governments we thought were sound are, in fact, corrupt. Governments we helped now turn their backs on us *Surprise!*

Companies we trusted have cheated us! Food we have trusted is bad for us. Beverages we eschewed turn out to be good for us. *Surprise!*

The country is becoming more liberal, then it's becoming more conservative, then it's liberal again. *Surprise!*

New medical advances are becoming commonplace. The computer I bought four years ago is, my children tell me, hopelessly obsolete. And my cell phone, the one they told me is the last one I'd ever have to buy, is absolutely worthless.

Every time we eradicate one drug from our neighborhoods another, new, designer drug takes its place. The vicissitudes of modern life crash in upon and wash over us unbidden and uninvited. Some we enjoy, others not so much

Psychologists tell us that change and surprise can add spice to our lives but we tend to thrive when we know what to expect. Animals in the laboratory do well when they know that they will be rewarded for pushing lever A and punished for pushing lever B. They will avoid B and concentrate on A.

But when we take the predictability out of the equation, when we make the rewards and punishments random the animals soon become fearful and refuse to approach either lever. Eventually, they refuse to move at all.

Fortunately, we are not animals in a lab. We humans can handle a certain amount of randomness, a certain amount of surprise in our lives. In fact, we tend to do better, to live more fully, more authentically when there is some unpredictability and spontaneity to our days.

The key to enjoying the pleasant surprises and mitigating the unpleasant ones is to be ready for them. As oxymoronic as it sounds, you have to be prepared for surprises. You have to be looking for them.

This is true not just when we consider the vicissitudes of everyday life, but even when we consider the deeper things, the things of the spirit, of the soul. In fact, it may be even truer then.

IN OUR BLIND SPOT

On the first Sunday of Advent, we kick off the season of waiting and expectation.

It is traditionally called the “Sunday of Hope.”

We know that Jesus is returning, not just at the end of time but in every time. Jesus is constantly knocking at the door of our lives, asking us to let him in. Our responsibility, especially in advent, is to be listening for the knock because it comes when we least expect it. Matthew, using the symbolic, poetic language of his time, says: It can come when we are eating or drinking or when we are at a wedding reception, laughing and dancing. It can come when we are at work in the field or the factory, in the school or the office. It can come when things are going well or badly, when we are sick or when we are well, when we are happy or when we are disappointed. When we are up or when we are down.

Let’s go back to that dent in my car again:

I know that I can’t turn my head as far as I used to. I tend to use the mirrors more than I have in the past. There was bright sunshine, I’ve just paid the guy for my new Jeep, my bucket list car, something I’ve always wanted, and I’m excited and I’m backing up so I can turn around and drive out of the guy’s ridiculously long driveway and I’m using the sideview and rearview mirrors that I’m not quite used to and, all of a sudden, I see our black Tucson looming up in the mirror...too late.

I pull forward and get out of the Jeep and go to look at the door of the Tucson and all the excitement of buying my Jeep leaks out of the day. My brother, Brian, is my insurance agent. His response to this story was to ask, “The Tucson was in your blind spot?”

I said, “Yes, my blind spot.”

He said, “And by blind spot, you mean, the place where you weren’t looking?”

I said, “Yeah. That.”

Grace, says Matthew, always strikes us in our blind spot. That is, the place where we aren’t looking, and at the time we aren’t looking there.

Listen as theologian Paul Tillich describing that moment in his sermon, “You Are Accepted,” (*The Shaking of the Foundations*). It is almost a contemporary paraphrase of Matthew:

“[Grace] happens; or it does not happen. And certainly, it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes

us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace."

This week Matthew reminds us that the grace of God always comes as a shock. Even when we know it is coming it can still catch us unaware. The prophets alerted us to it. Jesus awoke us to it. The church prepares us for it. History tells us of it. And, like the other vicissitudes of life, it still manages to take us by surprise.

If we would receive grace in all of its power, with all of the benefit it provides to our lives, we would do well to work at being prepared, to wake up, to look around, to illuminate our blind spots, to take some time to ready ourselves for the grace of God which is going to break into our lives when we aren't looking.

THE WHEN AND THE HOW

Fortunately, Jesus himself tells us how to prepare for his coming. His instructions are found in the very first words he speaks after his baptism by John.

Matthew speaks of them, but it is Mark who spins them fully out: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in this good news." (Mark 1: 14-15)

The first question he answers is, "When?"

The answer is, "Now."

Jesus is coming! And if this eschatological pronouncement, this prophetic word is to speak to our lives, if it is to open a door to authentic, Christian living then the answer cannot be only "at the end of time." The eschaton is an existential reality; the Kingdom is breaking forth right in front of us. Right now! Look, there it is!

In the love of a mother for her infant child. In the laughter of a teenager. In the affection of husband and wife for each other. In the sacrificial living of a missionary doctor. In the courage and the hope and the vision of those who remain in the mission field long after the crisis is over. In the simple lesson of a Sunday School teacher and the complex ruminations of a seminary professor.

God's grace is striking all around us. In the forgiveness of one sorely wronged. In the helping hands of those who have, themselves, received help. In the gift given without thought of repayment, in the favor done without being asked, in the random act of kindness, given anonymously, as a gift. In all these and more, the Grace of God is radically present, but if we aren't awake, we'll miss it.

"The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand..." Right here. Right now.

In church, at work, in the classroom, in the field, in the store, at home. The grace of God is breaking into lives waiting for nothing and transforming everything.

That's when.

The only question left is how will we get ourselves ready? How will we prepare ourselves for this life transforming in-breaking of grace? Again, Jesus answers the question.

"...repent and believe this good news."

It is with repentance and faith that we best prepare ourselves for the advent of Jesus in our lives.

First, by repentance. We give up our false gods, our idols, our reliance on ourselves, our worship of things we can buy. We turn away from our separation and estrangement, our old hurts and our grudges. We walk away from the things that keep us from loving and forgiving others. We decide to do it and then we do it.

We toss out those old attitudes that separate us from God's other children according to the color of our skin or the sound of our accent, the style of our clothing, the size of our paycheck or the location of our house. If we have two coats we give one to our neighbor who has none, and we do the same with food and with shelter. We make an effort, a real and sincere effort to live according to what we need and not what we want or what advertisers have convinced us that we want.

We turn our backs on ways of living that are destructive, consumptive, decadent, violent, wasteful, selfish and just plain silly. And we turn towards those ways that are kind and gentle, loving and forgiving, peaceful and nurturing. In other words, we turn away from the world and toward Jesus.

And then, secondly, we step out in faith.

We gamble. We resolve to live by the power of Jesus in our lives regardless of the outcome. We take the risk that even though Christ's way is the right way, we may not see the payoff that we expect. We accept that the reward for living the life which Christ offers us often exists not in this world but in that yet unseen realm where the first are last, the blind see, lame dance, and the poor are blessed.

In short, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, the coming of Grace, the coming of God into our lives *by living as though it has already happened*.

The Pacific Islander told the anthropologist, "We do not dance because we are happy; we are happy because we dance." Likewise, Christians do not receive God's grace because we live by faith, we live by faith because we receive God's grace – have received, do receive, and will receive.

This is the word of Hope.

This is the word for the first Sunday of Advent.

"The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe this good news."

AMEN