

“REQUESTS AND SURPRISES”
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Luke 1:39-45
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
December 23, 2018

Let’s begin with a quick review. During the Children’s Time, I observed that Christmas gifts fall into two categories: requests and surprises. Sometimes we receive gifts that we’ve specifically asked for, and sometimes we receive gifts that are totally unexpected. Then I gave the children a listening exercise for my sermon, hoping the rest of you will be listening as well. Once again, here’s what I’m asking you to listen for.

The gift of the Christ child is the most unique, important gift any of us will receive this Christmas. He is much more than a coveted toy, gadget, or article of clothing. Christ is the gift of God’s very Self. But which kind of gift is he? Is the coming of Christ something we have asked for, or is it something unexpected? Is God’s gift to us a response to a request, or does it come as a surprise?

Well, the gift of Christ is obviously a response to a request – a request that is first made more than 25 centuries ago. Today’s reading from the prophet Micah sounds a note of hope and expectancy which we hear often in the Hebrew Scriptures. Toward the end of the Old Testament period, the people of Israel have returned home from exile, but they are still living under foreign domination, without their own king or kingdom. They ask God repeatedly to act in a decisive way – to send a Liberator, a new and righteous ruler who will deliver the nation from its oppressors and restore Israel to its former glory. In other words, Israel makes a gift request; but unlike many of our gift requests, this one is marked “URGENT!” God’s people aren’t asking Santa for a new video game, I-phone, or cashmere sweater – things they could easily live without. No, they’re asking God to rescue them from the jaws of death; they’re asking God to show up in person and demonstrate the divine power in their lives; they’re asking for a world of peace, justice, and freedom; they’re asking for salvation.

And so, in our Old Testament lesson Micah announces that God is about to grant their request. Micah foretells the coming of a Messiah, one who will not only rule over his own people (Micah 5:2), but one whose greatness will be acknowledged by people all over the earth (v. 4). The gift they have asked for, waited for, and longed for is about to be given, and it will be better than anything they could have imagined.

But notice who this promise is actually addressed to – not to the nation in general, but to a specific zip code: “Bethlehem, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler of Israel” (v. 2). Do you hear it? The Messiah is coming alright; but he will come, not from a noble and powerful family in Jerusalem, but from a small, obscure band of kinfolk out in the boonies of Bethlehem. Yes, God’s people will receive the gift they have requested, but it will still come as a surprise.

Now fast forward to our two lessons from the Gospel of Luke. The main characters in this story are an old woman named Elizabeth and a teenage girl named Mary, who happen to be relatives. Elizabeth is the wife of Zechariah, an elderly priest who never makes it to the big-time in the temple ministry. For her own part, Elizabeth is not only aged but barren, which in that

culture means she is over-the-hill and virtually worthless. Over the years this couple has surely requested the gift of a child, but the gift has never been given – until one day the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and tells him that his wife will defy the biological clock and bear him a son. They will name him John, and he will grow up to be a mighty prophet to the people of Israel.

Zechariah is skeptical at first – who wouldn't be? But surprise, surprise! – the angel's prediction comes true. In today's second Gospel lesson, Elizabeth is now six months along in her late-in-life pregnancy. Her kinswoman Mary comes to visit her, and Elizabeth's baby is already kicking in her womb. Knowing the adult John as we do, we suspect that he is struggling to get out and start preaching! But, no, Elizabeth says her baby is “jumping for gladness” at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:44). And Elizabeth herself is also ecstatic to meet up with Mary and starts singing her praises. One would expect Elizabeth to be praising God about her own state of motherhood, but here her focus is entirely on Mary.

So, what's all the fuss about in the meeting of these two women and an unborn baby? Well, it turns out that there are more surprises in this story. For biological reasons, Elizabeth is too old to bear a child, and, by our cultural standards today, Mary is too young; but, lo and behold, Mary is also pregnant! The angel Gabriel has appeared to her, too, and told her that she will bear a son whom she will name Jesus. He “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was” (1:32). In other words, Mary's son will not be just a prophet like Elizabeth's son; he will be the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

I'm telling you, the surprise gifts in this story just keep coming. Mary is unmarried; she is still a virgin; but by divine miracle, she is going to have a baby! Mary is also poor and powerless, the very definition of a “nobody,” but it is she who will give birth to the ruler of Israel and of all creation! Mary is like everyone else in her beleaguered nation: she has requested the gift of a Messiah, and it is no real surprise to her that this request is finally being granted. But still, the gift is a surprise because it is being given through her.

She expresses her sense of wonder, first to the angel Gabriel, and then, in today's first Gospel reading, to her relative Elizabeth. Mary bursts into song, beginning with joy and praise that God has favored her – a handmaiden of low estate, of all people. But notice: only briefly does Mary speak of herself. She sees God's grace and goodness toward her as but a single instance of the way of God in the world. God routinely blesses the poor, the oppressed, and the hungry; and in the great reversal at the end of time, God will bring down the proud and rich oppressors and exalt those who have been disenfranchised, disregarded, and dismissed. This is yet another surprise gift under the Christmas tree – the kind of gift that will bless and thrill some people but will shock and disappoint others.

The most remarkable feature of Mary's song is that this future she envisions is said to have already happened, which is one final surprise. The justice God will bring to pass is spoken of in the past tense: God “has” shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, has lifted up the lowly, has filled the hungry, and has sent the rich away empty. Why the past tense? According to the latest news reports, these things have not yet occurred.

Of course, these conditions do remain unfulfilled, but Mary's song still has the ring of truth. One of the ways the faithful express trust in God is to speak of the future with such

confidence that it is described as already here. God is God and God is always at work to set things right in the world, no matter what the morning headlines say. In the gift of Jesus Christ, God's future age of salvation has begun with a bang. And so, you and I praise God for having already done what lies before us to do. Without this song of praise, the noblest efforts to achieve justice in society become arrogant projects, messianic moves by one group against another – you know, conservatives versus progressives, religious zealots versus secular humanists – competing for camera time. Fred Craddock once said that “God's people parade before they march.” That is, they celebrate God's victory before they try to achieve their own victory. Without the parade, the march may soon become lockstep, and perhaps even goosestep. Who, then, will remain to say, “My soul magnifies the Lord”?

I come back, then, to the question I raised at the outset. Is the gift of Christ a response to a request, or is the gift a surprise? As it turns out, it is both. Many of us have Christ at the top of our wish-list at Christmastime; and, thanks be to God, our wish is about to be granted. But when the gift of Christ is actually given, it will come in surprising ways, in unexpected places, to unlikely people. Let me venture a guess: if the Messiah were to appear today, he would be born, not in the grandeur of Washington, D.C., where the fate of nations hangs in the balance, but in a sleepy little town like Woodbury, Connecticut, where the fate of Dollar General hangs in the balance! If the Messiah were to show up today, he would not be born to a power couple like the President and First Lady, but to an immigrant couple trying to make a home for themselves in a strange land.

Some of you will recognize the name of Mookie Betts, the outfielder for the Boston Red Sox who was named the Most Valuable Player in the American League this year. After helping the Red Sox to win Game 2 of the World Series last October, Mookie Betts feasted with friends and family in his Boston apartment. The postgame spread overflowed with trays of steak tips, chicken, rice, beans, and vegetables. When the party was over, there was a buffet line's worth of leftovers. At almost 2 AM, Betts – along with his girlfriend, parents, and friends – bundled up and went to the nearby Boston Public Library, where many of the city's homeless population sleep at night. They laid out tin foil trays of food and handed out wet napkins and bottled water. One of the persons who witnessed this event was Mike Winter, who hosts VIP's at area nightclubs. Winter later told a radio station, “I didn't know who they were at first. They had hoodies on. They were handing out trays of food. Then they're walking around all of Boston's library, where there are tons of homeless, and telling people there is food around the corner . . . No pictures, no nothing. None of the homeless even knew who he was, but they were just grateful for what he was doing.”

Friends, I cannot imagine a better image of the Christ who comes at Christmas. With all due respect to the people who camp out at the Boston Public Library, there is a sense in which all of us are homeless and hungry. We may have a roof over our heads and food on our tables, but our hearts are displaced and famished. This Christmas, you and I have requested the gift of a Comforter, a Shepherd, a Savior; and we have the assurance that we will get what we've asked for. But don't be surprised if he shows up in a hoodie – and not just to us, but to people who are literally hungry and make their home in the cold night air. And he is asking us to join him there, to share our food and drink, to bring God's justice to a weary and waiting world.