

Text: [Luke 1:5-25](#)

Date: December 3, 2022

Title: "The Joy of the Unexpected" >
Joy to the World, Week 2

Theme: The most joyful things in life come from God's biggest surprises.

1

There are plenty of people who hate surprises.

Maybe you're one of them.

Don't try throwing these folks a surprise birthday party.

They won't be happy.

And don't come to them with a last-minute change of plans.

YOU may be thrilled about this great idea you just had,

but you might be disappointed in their reaction if you spring it on them without warning

For my surprise-haters out there: Does that sum it up?

I'm not sure whether we're born with a natural inclination to love or hate surprises – I don't know.

But I DO know that if you get enough bad-news surprises, you can come to fear them.

I remember one particularly difficult season of ministry, where my church seemed to be suffering loss on top of loss.

One morning, I was in the office, and the phone rang. <pause>

That's the story, the phone rang.

And when the phone rang, I remember going into a mini-panic attack right there at my desk.

Because I was afraid of the bad news I was *sure* I was going to hear on the other end of the line.

Luckily, I had the presence of mind to get help.

I started seeing my therapist again the following week.

2

This message is about the JOY of the unexpected

But let's begin by acknowledging what we already know

Not every surprise is good
And not every surprise is welcome

And honestly, even surprises that promise incredible joy can be tinged with loss

I mean, a big promotion might require you to move halfway across the country, away from family and friends

On the other hand, even a difficult surprise – like a sudden loss or illness, can bring surprising, if bittersweet joy – for example, by drawing us closer to family and friends

3

I feel like all that is here in the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist

The joy and excitement

But also the fear and questioning

In ancient Israel, members of the priestly families lived throughout the country

According to ancient sources, there were something like 18,000 priests, divided into 24 divisions

And each year, a priest was required to go to Jerusalem two separate weeks to offer their service

To be selected to offer incense as Zechariah was – that was a big deal
Incense was offered twice a day on an altar just outside the Holy of Holies – the place where God was thought to dwell

A place where only the priests were allowed to go

And even then, you could only go if your name was chosen by lot

Once you did it, you were not permitted to serve ever again – just to give others a chance

I tried to do a little math on this, and given the number of priests and the very few opportunities to serve, I'm guessing your likelihood of being chosen in any given year was less than 4%

I'm certain many were never chosen at all – in fact, it's clear Zechariah had been waiting his whole life for this opportunity

So you can imagine how fortunate and blessed the old man might have felt

HERE was a surprise that brought him joy
Finally being recognized
Finally serving in a way he'd dreamed of for a long time

But suddenly, his joy turns to terror
He's "overcome with fear" as the angel speaks to him
Because apparently, **angels are frightening creatures**

Gabriel begins by apologizing for himself
Apologizing for his presence
Beginning, as angels always do, by saying: "Do not be afraid."

In that moment, he's surprised by joy
The joy that he and Elizabeth will finally be parents
And by this news that the child to be born will be a great prophet – the new
Elijah
But how could news of a baby coming so late in life NOT be scary?

4

I think most of us are like Zechariah.
We spend our whole lives waiting to hear from God, longing to hear from
God
And then, when we DO hear from God, we're terrified by the surprise and
shock of it all

It seems too amazing to be true
Zechariah even argues with Gabriel: "How can I be sure of this?"
It's too much to take in.
It's too wonderful to imagine that God who made the world, would ever care
to talk to **me**.
Would ever care to intervene for **me**.
"This baby's gonna do **what?**"

It's natural to think that. God's very big. And we're very small.
Why would we ever think we should be the ones to play a part in what God
is doing?

**But, let me ask you a question: if that's not what we're expecting
Then what, exactly, are we waiting and hoping for when we pray?**

>>If we worship a God who can do **anything**

>>Then why should we be surprised when God does **something**?

I can't help but imagine that Zechariah woke up that morning thinking:

"Of course I won't be chosen.

I've been doing this now for 40 years, and I still can't catch a break."

He's a priest, serving a God who can do **anything**

And yet, when God **does** something in his life, **speaks** something into his life, it comes as a total shock to him

How long have **YOU** been waiting, watching, and hoping something would happen in your life?

Have you so settled into your routine that, if THE thing actually happened, it would shock you?

So much that you would be too afraid to believe it? Too afraid to do it?

5

Friends, this is how God works

God works in our lives by doing the surprising thing

By doing the thing we didn't expect

That's been true in my life, time and time again

But I would say that, even more often, the surprise is that God does **EXACTLY** the thing we hoped for

Except God does it precisely **AT THE MOMENT** when we've given up hope of it ever happening

That's this scripture

On the same day that Zechariah fulfills a lifelong dream of serving

He also learns that God is about to bless him and Elizabeth with a son

This is the story of God in a life

God showing up and surprising us by doing the unexpected:

The unexpected relationship

The unexpected opportunity

The unexpected experience

The unexpected blessing

But equally surprising?

It's when the thing we hoped for, waited for, and prayed for
Finally happens in the moment we least expected

--

The joy of knowing God

Is in knowing that God has the power to break into our situation at any time

To surprise us, to shock us

To occasionally terrify us

But ultimately to bless us with unexpected joy

--

The unexpected is at the core of Christmas

All these people in all these stories: Zechariah and Elizabeth

Mary and Joseph

The shepherds in the fields

The wise men in the east

They all are just doing their things

Going about their everyday stuff

When God shows up and surprises them

SHOCKS them, even, with good news of great joy

Which is for all people

This week, expect the unexpected

Trust God to show up and surprise you with joy

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ