

2 Christmas C - 3 January 2010
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a, Luke 2:41-52
Jim Stockton

Creation, grace, power and might - God is known for many things. Happily one of the things for which God is most known by those who most know God is surprise. The year that ended at midnight Thursday night was a year that brought many surprises. It brought to many people's lives much that was unexpected and most of it also unwelcome: unemployment and under-employment figures that are unprecedented in this country since the Great Depression; financial loss and the collapse of financial systems around the world that, again, are unprecedented in modern times.

Closer to home, we here at ECR suffered in quick succession the shocking loss of people dear to us all and whose prayers and labors helped to sustain this community for decades. As if not enough, we endured the violation of the safety and sanctity of the buildings that house our ministries and our worship of God.

If there is anything positive that can be said for the hardships of 2009, it may be that they are helping people to notice more clearly the blessings that came to them in the otherwise awful year that just has passed. And this, I think, is God's persistent way. As with rules, so also with expectations: they are made to be broken. People who are in trouble for what is long time and feels even longer, come to expect that the way things are now is the way that are likely to remain. This is an expectation that God is good at breaking.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks in his day to a people who have surrendered themselves to the notion that from now on and probably forever they will exist on the margins, allowing themselves little hope that things will ever change. But God's hope persists when that of the people cannot. "God has rescued the people," say Jeremiah.

And it is important to note here that the people's rescue is history, it is something God has already done. This is surely the bigger surprise for the people in all that Jeremiah has to tell them. Among this litany and list of things that will happen one day: God will gather the people, God will lead them to safety and comfort, they will celebrate, they will flourish, they will prosper - among all

these things that are still to come, the real surprise to the people is that God has already saved them from the thing they feared the most: that things would never change; that their lives would never be better.

You may remember the story of the young man who goes to the fortune-teller. Fresh out of college, he wants to get a little insight on his future. The fortune-teller looks at his palm. She shakes her head and declares, "You will be a miserable person for many years." The young man is surprised. "You will be disappointed in love," she goes on. "You will struggle to keep a job. You will mourn for lack of money. You will be unhappy for many years to come," she says. "Until you turn 45, young sir," she says, "you will always be unhappy." None of this is what the young man is expecting to hear.

Happily or sadly, surprises will, by definition, contradict our expectations. This is exactly what happens to the parents of Jesus. Think about it: Mary expects to wed Joseph, and he expects to wed her. They plan to raise a family, and she just be wife to her husband the carpenter, and he the husband of his wife and father of his children. Mary's expectations, Joseph's expectations, are contradicted all along the way. Both are surprised to find that Mary is to be the mother of the Savior sent by God; to find the Joseph is take the pregnant girl to be his wife and to raise the child as his own. Both are surprised by, and neither expected, wise men from the East to journey to see their child, to praise him, to speak of his appearing as the miraculous doing of God. Neither expected or hoped to have to run away to a foreign land to escape the murderous anger of a petty and jealous king.

Certainly it is true for any parent that parenthood is more than, and other than, what one expects. But for Mary and Joseph, it is true in a way that you and I can only try to imagine. When Jesus is twelve years old, Mary and Joseph and he head off to their annual celebration at the Temple in Jerusalem. There, they celebrate the Feast of the Passover, the defining feast that recalls the event that defines the Hebrew people.

Returning home will take about ten days. For the first day, Jesus is not with his parents. But what teenager wants to tag along with his parents when he or she might instead mingle with friends and family along the way. When he fails to show up after that, though, Mary and Joseph head back to the city to spend the next three days looking for their child.

Perhaps it is a lesser example, but it is yet another unexpected episode to add to their list of surprises around the young Jesus. Finding him among the rabbis at the Temple, finding the rabbis themselves surprised at Jesus' grasp of the religion of his people - this is, likely, a happier surprise. Who knows, maybe Jesus will grow up to be an expert in the Law! Of course, he does. But of course, it is not in the way that anyone is expecting.

And that's the point isn't it? Jesus must be, as he says it, in his "Father's house." And if Mary and Joseph fail to understand his remark, so also does anyone else in earshot. Is he speaking of the Temple? Is this the house of God, to which he refers? And even if there is someone among them who can possibly grasp the surprise that Jesus is, even if there is someone who can grasp that this teenager is the incarnation of God, not that he *will* be, but that he already *is* God come near; yet, can even the most astute, can even the most sensitive to God's way of the unexpected, grasp the surprise that is the real house of God, the true location of God's dwelling place on earth? Are they ready for the surprise? Is anyone? Are you and am I? We can look back at a year that saw surprises that few can say they welcomed. None of it was welcome. All of it surprised us.

At the fortune-teller, the young man is hearing his future. "You will be unhappy," says the fortune-teller, "for many years to come." "Until you turn 45, sir," she says, "you will always be unhappy." The young man is taken by surprise. None of this is what he is expecting to hear. "That's what my palm tells you?" he asks the fortune-teller. "Your palm tells me that you'll be unhappy," she replies. "I added the part about 45 years old myself." "So, do you think that when I'm 45 I finally meet my soul-mate?" he asks the fortune-teller. "Do I become a success? Do I become rich?" "No," says the fortune-

teller. "When you're 45, you will still be alone, you'll still be poor, and you'll still be a failure. I just figure you'll be used to it by then, and maybe won't be so unhappy anymore."

2009 gave us and the world around us a lot of surprises, unexpected and unwelcome. So, with less than a fond farewell, we bid Good-bye to 2009. But as God is known to do, God added to the mix. God's own surprises came your way and mine, and as we continue to look back on the year that is past, and look forward to this new one, and live into it, we will notice these more clearly and hold onto them more dearly.

Each of us can think of a person or people who came to us at just the right moment, offering to us just what we most needed at the time, or receiving from us just what we needed to give. God surprised us by helping us to surprise ourselves, by helping us to surprise someone else in the name of God's Love for them. In 2009 God surprised us, as God is known to do, and as God will surely and blessedly continue to do throughout 2010.

In this year we will continue to find God's surprise, and continue to offer this surprise to those whose lives we get to share; this wonderful surprise that never fails to delight, to comfort, to inspire: this surprise that the house of God is no longer a Temple, as if it ever was, not an address, not a building, not a place. And not just someday, but all last year, and throughout this year now come, the home of God already is the people of God. The place of God already is within you and me. And through us, the home of God is already being made, surprisingly, in the world around us. Happily, it is a surprise that I think we will never get used to. Happy New Year.

And now may Almighty God, who gladdens our hearts with the radiance of the beloved and only begotten One, so bless us with our communion in Christ Jesus that we spend the year to come in the grace and favor of God; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, One God, now and for ever. Amen.