

SURPRISE! YOU'RE GOING TO BE A DADDY!

Matthew 1: 18-25

A friend of mine stated the obvious when he said that there is a different excitement level between the birth of the first child and each additional child. For their first child, Casey's wife jubilantly announced, "Tim! We're pregnant! Hello, Daddy!" It was a big deal.

For the second child, his wife placed a pair of pink baby booties across his chest while he was napping.

For the third child, Tim's wife walked in one day and asked, "You want to look at minivans?" And that's how Tim knew she was going to have a baby.

Professor Jesse Long says he learned about the birth of his first child from a waitress. On February 28, 1983, his wife invited him out to a fancy French restaurant. After they were seated, the waitress presented Jesse with a pink and blue carnation and a note that read simply: "Honey, you are going to be a wonderful father." After getting over the initial shock, Jesse gave his wife a great big kiss, and all the other restaurant patrons applauded.

In France, the traditional greeting for expectant mothers was often the comment, "I congratulate you on your hope."

If any woman deserves that salutation, then Mary certainly does. The hope she carried was a hope for the whole world. But have you ever wondered how Mary told Joseph, her betrothed, that she was "with child?" Historians estimate that she was just a teenager, probably no more than 14 or so. A betrothal was as serious and binding as a marriage, not something to be broken except under the most dire of circumstances. And this looked like a dire circumstance. Mary was expecting a child. Joseph was not the father. According to the law, Joseph could have had her stoned to death. That was the penalty for infidelity.

Joseph's reaction to the news of Mary's pregnancy is very important. How do you think he felt when he heard the news? What emotions burdened his heart? His situation reminds me of an old joke: Did you hear about the van loaded with Roget's Thesauruses that collided with a taxi? Witnesses were "astounded, taken aback, surprised, startled, dumbfounded, thunderstruck and caught unaware."

Then there was the time the late Senator Joseph McCarthy emerged from a congressional committee room in high excitement. Reporters asked him to comment on a startling allegation that had just been made. "Why," McCarthy spluttered in all seriousness, "that's the most unheard of thing I've ever heard of."

Joseph's story reminds us that the Christmas message is always a surprise. I like the way author Max Lucado puts it. He says that Joseph is "caught between what God says and what makes sense." Maybe you are in that place this Christmas season. You want to believe that God knows you and cares about you. You want to believe that you are not alone in this world. You want to believe that you are following God's will for your life. But in your mind it just doesn't add up. It seems too good to be true. If that is your situation, then you and Joseph are kindred spirits. I am sure that Mary's tale of being chosen by God and being made "with child" by the Holy Spirit must have been the most unheard of thing he had ever heard of. Why would God choose an obscure peasant girl to bear the Messiah? And wasn't the Messiah supposed to a warrior-king, a conquering hero? Where does a baby fit into all this? There is no other religion on earth that claims its god gave up an exalted status in order to become weak and vulnerable. No other god suffered, or was an outcast. And no other god besides Jesus Christ claims to love us enough to come down to where we are.

Why would the Messiah be born under these circumstances? That must have been Joseph's first question. Perhaps it was because, "God wanted His Son to experience life in its blue-collar boldness. Jesus' first breath of air burned with the odor of animal waste. The first noises he heard were the grunts of livestock . . . From day one, God the Father determined not to shelter His Son from the rude, crude realities of life on Planet Earth."

An old woman was nearing her death, and she wanted to leave her estate to someone who would use it for good causes. So she set out to see a popular televangelist whose show she enjoyed. But the old woman's eyes virtually popped out of her head when she approached the televangelist's house. It was more luxurious than anything she could imagine. After a few minutes of chatting with the televangelist, the old woman finally spoke up.

"I was going to will my property to you when I die, but now I'm not so sure. After seeing your house, I think you're spending too much money on yourself."

The televangelist, with a gleaming smile, replied, "But all these wonderful things were bought for God's glory. You wouldn't expect Him to live in a barn, would you?"

Joseph's story reminds us that the Christmas message is always a surprise.

We are surprised, first of all, this Christmas season to realize *where* Jesus came from. He was born in such an obscure place.

John Steinbeck, in writing of his travels around the country, tells of his awe at standing along the continental divide, the place that separates one half of the country from the other. One would think that such an important place would be marked by a monument; instead, there was only a nondescript road

sign. As Steinbeck stood with one foot on either side of the continental divide and contemplated its importance, he wrote, “This is too great a fact for such an insignificant place as this.”

I’m sure Joseph thought the same thing as he contemplated the angel’s news. Why Bethlehem? Historians estimate that only about 300 people lived in Bethlehem in those days. Still, it was a busy place, a stopover for travelers headed to Egypt. Many hundreds of years before, the prophet Micah had predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which was also the birthplace of Israel’s great king, David. This birthplace had been chosen since before time began. We are surprised, first of all, this Christmas season to realize *where* Jesus came from.

We are also surprised this Christmas season to realize *who* Jesus came for. He came for the poor and the powerless and the obscure and the ordinary. Jesus came for the nameless and the no-account. He came to a peasant girl and a poor carpenter. He came for all those people who think no one really knows their name, for all those people who don’t have a strong arm to lean on when they’re in need, for all those people who will never grab the brass ring in this life.

Author Madeleine L’Engle once said that parents are only ever as happy as their least happy child. By sending Jesus to bring hope and help to the sick, the outcast, and the poor, God was showing a true Father’s heart. He can only be as happy as His least happy child.

There is a huge pauper’s grave in New York. It is filled with the bodies of people who were too poor to pay for their own burial. Many of the thousands who are buried there are nameless. They were homeless, prisoners, addicts, ill, or just too poor for anyone to care much about them. But the monument over the grave tells the truth. It bears one simple inscription from John 10: 3, “And He shall call His own by name.”

Francis of Assisi was born to a wealthy family. He could have spent his life as a member of the leisure class. But after he came to Christ, Francis gave up all his wealth and chose to live in voluntary poverty in order to identify with those whom Jesus loved. In fact, it is said that whenever Francis met a man poorer than himself, he exchanged clothes with that man.

That was Jesus’ plan too. He gave up his own glory in order to put on the “clothes” of an ordinary man. He came to see life through our eyes in order to convince us to see ourselves through his eyes.

And finally, we are surprised this Christmas season to realize *why* Jesus came. Not to lead his people into battle against the Romans. Not to reign in power and might. Not to set up a kingdom by force. As people say in

the Southern U.S., Jesus had bigger fish to fry. He came to lead us in battle against the forces of sin and death. He came to set up an eternal kingdom of justice and righteousness. He came to take away all our sins.

The news of Christmas may surprise us, but it doesn't have to scare us. Jesus came to save us from our sins. And he didn't do it with power or a show of force. He did it by humbling himself and coming to where we are.

Author Dennis Covington recalls that on long summer evenings when he and his buddies had been out fishing or playing ball, each boy's mother would call him home in a different way. Most mothers would lean out the back door and yell for her child. "Frankie! Danny! Stanley! Come home!" Some mothers had big cowbells outside the back door, and they would ring the cowbell to call a child home. But Dennis' dad was always the one to call him home. And Mr. Covington didn't just stand on the porch and yell for Dennis. He wandered down to the lake and softly called "Dennis." And father and son would walk home together. As Covington writes, "He always came to the place I was before he called my name."

And that's exactly what God did for us. In Jesus, He came to the place we were before He called us. He came for you. He is "Immanuel—God with us."