

The onset of Advent this year reminds me of the four children in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids, to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country...¹

Exploring the professor's big house on their first day, Lucy was the first to enter the *big wardrobe; the sort with a looking-glass in the door*. As she ventured deeper into the wardrobe, she kept glancing back to reassure herself, the way back remained open, **if** she needed it! "*I can always get back if anything goes wrong*", Lucy repeated to herself!

Given the year we've had, what can we expect of Advent 2020? The promise of vaccines to neutralise the CORONA virus beckons us to imagine a new world. Like Lucy, many are looking back for an assurance of the safety of the old world and familiar routines, just in case the new world does not turn out to be quite what we imagined.

The Iona Community gifted us this great Christmas carol:

Who would think that what was needed
To transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army,
Proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
That a child should lead the way?
**God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.**

The thought of God surprising us on Christmas Day fades as the years roll on, and becomes as comfortable as a well-known bedtime story read night-after-night, the familiarity lulls and dulls us into sweet slumber.

¹ Taken from the opening paragraph of the book.

I know many who try hard to find excitement in the familiar Christmas story, a glimpse perhaps, or a tinge of excitement, of *God surprising earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day*, but we are trapped by the images we have created, of a beaming lamp post set in a snowy landscape of winter, but never Christmas; of a crackling fire that teases welcome, but the door never opens to invite in; of carollers singing merrily on high, but never sharing the Good News; of images of the "Holy Family" journeying to Bethlehem in Judea, or posing around a wooden crib, all sanitised from the real world.

The world of Christmas we have created for ourselves fails to excite us. The routine has lost its shine and we have lost the plot: it was always **God's** plan to surprise us with Christmas day, His planned way out from the dangers and difficulties of this world by sacrificing His Son **twice**: first by letting Him leave the security of Holiness in Heaven to live among sin in this world, and second by watching His painful death on the cross, the one death necessary to defeat once-and-for-all-time, death's grip on us, releasing us to eternal life with The Father! As painful as it was to the Father to release His Son from Heaven, it was **His** plan to surprise us with His love, but has the surprise lost its sparkle?

The theme of Advent this year is, "God Still Surprises!"

29/11 Does God's timing surprise you?

06/12 Are you surprised when God answers prayer

13/12 Are you surprised by God's miracles?

20/12 When God appears, would it surprise you?

Let's discover how it is in God's character, His nature to surprise us through life's journey!

It is an obvious Truth, of which we need to be reminded very often: God's timing is always perfect!

The birth of Christ did not **just happen** when God thought it was a good time. The first mention of the Messiah follows God's meticulous and elaborate act of Creation. Having settled the man and the woman in a sin-free and care-free world, that's when God's arch-enemy satan² decided to challenge His authority by inciting the man and the woman to disobey God. God condemns satan saying, the "*off-spring (seed) of the woman*" will strike satan's head, a prophecy of Jesus' ultimate defeat of Satan, and the first hint of the virgin birth, declaring the Messiah would be of the "*Seed of the Woman*, but not of the man (implied by exclusion).

Satan gloated in his first-flush of victory, but God's plan wasn't thwarted when Adam and Eve fell for satan's trap to disobey Him. God saw satan's ultimate defeat and surprised him with the announcement of His plan of salvation, to bring deliverance to the human race through the one to be known as the Messiah.

Satan's battle to dislodge us from God's security and pluck us from eternity with Him, continued through history. He tried to thwart God's timing of history by confusing Abraham into believing that his wife Sarah's maid would have God's promised son and heir, but God surprised satan and had His way.

Satan tried to dislodge Job's faith by destroying his family, his wealth and his health. In the midst of his most severe trials Job says, *Even though my trials may kill me, my faith in God is rock solid; my hope is in no one else but God.*³ When he feels abandoned and rejected by everyone, and his wife says that his breath is repulsive, Job declares once again, *I know that my*

² Only three references to a supernatural being in the Hebrew Bible: the prologue to Job, Zechariah 3:1-2 and 1 Chronicles 21:1

³ Job 13:15

*Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God, for myself, with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!*⁴

God surprised satan by restoring Job, way beyond his wildest dreams.⁵

History marches on! When the people of Israel informed the prophet Samuel they wanted a king like in their neighbouring countries, God let them have their way, and their first king, Saul was a disaster⁶ ! God surprised them by directing Samuel to anoint David to be His chosen leader of His people⁷. Satan again tried his very best to make David fail, but God surprised satan with a promise to David, *I will make a house for you—a dynasty of kings! ...Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever.*⁸

The prophet Jeremiah (among others) confirmed God's plan, *I will raise up from David, a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour.*⁹

So it was though the ages; God's perfect plan always surprised satan. The prophet Micah said, *As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity." Therefore, He will give them up until the time when she who is in labour has borne a child.*¹⁰ Spoken about 700 years before Jesus was born to Mary, this well-known prophesy refers to a female giving birth to a child, who is described as having existed from eternity, a characteristic exclusive to God.

⁴ Job 19:25-27

⁵ Job 42

⁶ 1 Samuel 8-15

⁷ 1 Samuel 16

⁸ 2 Samuel 7

⁹ Jeremiah 23:5-6

¹⁰ Micah 5:2-3

The wait for a Messiah faded over hundreds of years. God's promise dwindled and disappeared into the record books of history, until it was in God's perfect time that the genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew (Ch. 1), traced through Joseph, Jesus' legal (not natural) father establishes His claim and right to the throne of David (v. 6), and the genealogy in the Gospel of Luke (3:23-38) that of Mary, come together.

People in both Joseph and Mary's family ancestry were not perfect by any means; men and women had fallen into sinful ways, yet in God's perfect time, God fulfilled the promise of a Saviour.

But there were still obstacles to overcome for the Son of God to be born as foretold! The Master of human history moved the will of Quirinius the Governor to order a census which required Mary and Joseph to travel at a very inconvenient time when Mary was pregnant to Bethlehem, a little town in Judea so overwhelmed with people, there was no room for the couple in the local inn. Jesus' birth was innocuous, born and laid to rest in a manger, the corner of a house where animals were kept.

Only three groups of people knew of Jesus' birth: on the night of His birth, a group of shepherds in the hills cradling Bethlehem were informed by an Angel and affirmed by an exuberant "Choir of Angels"; on the eighth day after His birth, when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated, Simeon and Anna who had prayed they would see the Saviour of Israel, each before they died; and shortly thereafter (we don't know exactly when) a group of astrologers, guided by divine wisdom followed a star and visited the infant Jesus, quite innocently disclosing the location of His birthplace to the megalomaniac Herod, who wanted the "King" killed.

But God surprised satan, dispatching an Angel to escort them safely to Egypt, and at an appropriate time thereafter, back to their home town of Nazareth.

God surprised everyone, delivering His Son who would be our Saviour, protecting Him, keeping Him out of the limelight until He was ready for His three year mission, starting with His baptism and leading to His crucifixion.

God surprises! His timing may cause us inconvenience, but His timing is always perfect!

As you enter this Advent season, perhaps you are facing difficulty, the deep grief of loss, discouragement, financial concerns, addiction, depression, or even a sense that God is far from you.

God is at work in His world and in His Church. His timing may catch us off guard and surprise us, but His plans should not. His Son Jesus our Christ invites us to get to know the Father better. Then God's surprise won't shock us, His surprises become a source of delight and joy! His timing may derail our plans, but God's timing is perfect; He **will** accomplish what he has set out to do.

The opening scenes of C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* set the stage for readers young and old, to await Aslan's return to Narnia, bringing with him the joy of Christmas. Lewis doesn't mention the birth of Christ specifically, but he writes out of a deep sense of wonder, awe and joy, that God surprising earth with Heaven is a world-transforming event: the Word, God Himself clothes Himself in human flesh, to be one of us and live among us (John 1:18).

God chose to surprise earth with Heaven, in person, arriving here on Christmas Day!

AMEN.