

Sermon12-25-09—"God's Surprising Gift"

This morning we stand on the cusp of a new decade, with mixed feelings about the ten years coming to an end. More than one commentator has called this 9/11 decade the "decade from hell." In any case, sometimes the realities of the current Christmas often don't seem to be able to compete with the happy memories of Christmases past. Have you noticed how our memories can blur over the years, rough places smooth out, and then perhaps we remember Christmases gone by, rosier and more bedecked with holly than they actually were?

We have just heard the conclusion of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, familiar to us all. But like all great literature, we have heard it so often that we may have missed insights and meanings that can illuminate life in a new way for us. I realized that some weeks ago when I began to ponder what I would say to you on Christmas Day 2009 as a disturbing decade now winds quickly down. I was struck in a new way as I read, "And all who heard it were **amazed** at what the shepherds told them..."

AMAZED? Did that word jump out at you the way it did for me? I doubt that any of us can say that we've been amazed lately at Christmastime—or for that matter, probably seldom anytime of the year.

As a matter of fact, that may be the least likely thing we're looking for at Christmas: to be amazed. What most of us look forward to is the comfortable good feeling we have in hearing the familiar Christmas carols once again, and doing things with friends and family that down through the years have brought pleasure. That's

why even children of all ages—eight to eighty—watch a re-run of Charlie Brown's Christmas, and there's one network or more re-running "The Miracle on 34th St." Many of you come to this service for the same reason. We're accustomed to, and appreciate traditional Christmases.

At a deeper level, we might observe that we're not amazed by much of anything anymore—although I have to admit I'm still amazed that President Obama can debate with the premier of China in Copenhagen one day and then talk about it from the lawn of the White House several hours later. I've spoken about rapid personal, cultural, social and political changes from the pulpit so many times in the last 50 years that I may have a psychic overload on change and that's why I savor a traditional Christmas as much as I do.

But sometime in the cold winter days after Christmas we have to wake up and realize we're may be missing something. We can give our children or grandchildren computer games for Christmas but God hasn't really given us a computerized world. I was reminded of that when I read Loren Eisely's book "*The Unexpected Universe*" several years ago. He is not one of those scientists who used to wrap up the universe into a neat package of law and order. Through illustrations ranging from seashells to human cells, he shows that there is something beyond the rational, that points to an unexpected, unforeseeable future. He points us beyond computerized answers into an openness for the unexpected, the surprises in life.

A more homely illustration of how life can be surprising is the birth of a baby into any home, as many of us can testify. Christmas is

a story about a baby, and a baby's chief business is to turn things upside down. Every baby is committed too rearranging everything he sees or can get his hands on, from the order of importance in the family to the dishes on the table or the ornaments on the Christmas tree. One could say that a baby divides time into two eras, just as Christmas does. There is B.C,"before child" and A.D. which could mean "after deluge."

All of this accents the central core of truth that Christmas is not so much a tradition to look **back** to for meaning in a confused world, as it is an astonishment, a surprise to the unexpected in the future. The birth of Christ, more than any other baby's birth, turns everything upside down: "the upside of heaven has come down to earth."

This baby Jesus was an unexpected Messiah—that's why they were amazed. Most of the people of Israel had expected a Christ who would liberate them from Rome. He didn't. Instead he liberated them from the power of the demonic and freed them from sin and guilt. Instead of instilling a love of the religious Law for its own sake, as many would hope he would do, instead he talked about a law of love, which he said was the fulfilling of all laws.

Someone has said that "the best way to send an idea is to wrap it up in a person." That was what happened on the first Christmas. The idea of divine love was wrapped up in a person. But it's no wonder that they hardly recognized him, because he was not the Christ they expected. They were amazed.

For some that amazement was complete disbelief. For others it meant an opening of their eyes, minds, and hearts, and ears to perceive God at work in new and unexpected ways to bring healing, love, and creative change into a world that seems sometimes to be running on no track at all, or running on a track that goes around in circles. But wonder of wonders: now we know that life can change, for the better, and he can give us the power to do that if we're willing to look for the unexpected and respond to it.

That means not looking back, trying somehow to recover Christmas through familiar words and ceremonies and traditions, but to use all those words and ceremonies and traditions as a searchlight for looking forward, looking for the future Christ in our lives, who is ready to break through the crusts of our old cultures, and indeed our aging personal lives, to give a newness, a vitality, and a vigor of new love, that can and should come with God's surprising gift of a baby—a baby born for you and me and our world, **this** Christmas. AMEN!