

What Surprise is in "Star" for Us
December 20, 2009
The United Church of Gainesville
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Luke 1:39- following - Mary's Magnificat

Children's Story: Here I am again, a life size version of the Christmas elf.

Who was the elf last year? Andy. And the year before, who was the flying angel? Sandy. So it's been three years since I have appeared as the elf? How many of you remember that? Well, Vince has never been here for a full season of the elf. So let's help him and anyone else who hasn't seen him before understand the elf.

Vince: *What is Christmas all about? (If they get off track, then ask who was born on Christmas?)*

Children: It's about Jesus' birthday.

Vince: *Then what does the elf have to do with Jesus?*

Larry: When Jesus was born, we saw that God, who is invisible, can be seen in the birth of a human child. I, the elf, am just one way of understanding this. Remember how I started. Where was I the first Sunday in Advent? I was way in the back. About all you could see was my foot.

Each week I have come closer to the front of the church. And "Poof" today I'm big and real. I'll be tiny and back in the rafters on Christmas Eve, but you'll be able to see all of me.

I'm here this morning to show that the elf, like Christmas, little or big always appears in surprising places.

Vince: *I have one other question. Are you one of Santa's elves?*

Elf: I'm glad you asked me that question. Here's a new book going around called the "Elf on the Shelf", where a little elf called Foddle, Criddle, or Clyde, or even Leon (which is Noel spelled backwards) sits on a shelf watching how children are doing, listens to their Christmas wishes and goes back to Santa every night to make a report. Now the elf on the shelf is fine, but he's from another family of elves altogether.

As the United Church of Gainesville elf, I get to remind you of three things my kind of elf does.

Vince: *And what would those be?*

Elf: First, elves make people smile. And you can make people smile too, usually by just smiling at them. Let's try it. All of you stand up and smile at all those people in the church. *(11:00 people in front row stand, turn around and smile at people in back)*

Look at how they can't help but smile back.

Second, Elves help people who need help. Did you see all the angels that were on the tree in the foyer? They were for children who might not otherwise have a very special Christmas. I saw you and your families bring gifts for all those children. I saw hundreds of socks filled with things for people in Gainesville who have no place to live.

There are even more ways to help. Think of how you can help your parents this week. Think of how you can help a friend. And especially think of how you can help someone who's a little sad and lonely.

Third elves remind everyone to remember what it's like to be a kid and believe good things are always going to happen. Christmas is a time to wish on stars, like the ones you made up there, and believe that God's starlight shines on every wish. Christmas is a time to believe that God's light shines in the darkness, that good things happen, good gifts come, people are kind, and even big bad things like wars will finally stop.

Elves remind us of all these things that make what is invisible, the love of God, visible, like the elf, and like you. Because the love of God is visible in every one of you.

Prayer

Birthdays.

Sermon -

Sandy reads scripture

Here I am, back again. Let me remind you of a few things about me. As the Christmas Elf, I come into visibility from invisibility, and as such I am very much like two things you know, yourself and God. You were once invisible. Then you were born, tiny and helpless. As a baby nobody knew who you would be, but your parents had dreams and hopes for you. Then you grew. You partly embodied the dreams of your parents. And the other part was you, your own person. You surprised your parents, the world and even yourself, a little. You have the gift of God's presence in you.

If I may be so bold, I am a good symbol for Christmas, I am good for children. Now realize, I am folded up on the rafters of this church for a month every year, and I hear

things you say. I know that some of you do argue that I am just another distraction to Christmas. Some of you point out that I'm not after all in the bible.

But if I may remind you, most of what we know as Christmas is not in the bible. There is no donkey in the bible's Christmas story. If you find one there I'll come over to your house and make you pancakes for breakfast.

Even in the bible, the gospel writers don't agree. Only Luke says there was no room at the inn, so that Jesus was born in a manger. Only Luke mentions shepherds and angels.

Matthew is the only gospel that mentions wise men. The star which the wise men followed appears only in Matthew.

And while I'm at it. The gospels of Mark and John have no Christmas story whatsoever.

I could go on and on. There's no little drummer boy, no holly and ivy, no Christmas tree, and no record anywhere that Jesus was born on December 25. That was a Roman holiday, Saturnalia, a day of drunkenness and people singing naked in the streets, which may have been the original inspiration for current Christmas office parties.

Now we can go two ways with all this. One is to become purists and follow only what the bible says. Today's Jehovah's Witness reject all holiday celebrations, even birthdays, as unbiblical. But lest we get too smug about other folks being party poopers, our own forebears, the Puritans, which comes from the word purify, did not celebrate Christmas at all. In fact it was illegal to observe Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681, where our predecessor church, the Congregationalists, pretty much ran things.

So you can decide that I the elf am not biblical at Christmas, but go down that road and you can wind up like a perfectly prune faced puritan.

The other danger is embracing the cultural Christmas a little too happily, just buying the whole thing about what Charlie Brown's Lucy calls "The Spirit of Getting." I like to believe as the elf that I am a good symbol of the joy and surprises at the heart of welcoming the birth of the holy into the world in human form.

I'm a trickster, and I believe fun is good. In fact I love the words of the poet Auden who said, "As a rule the pleasure haters are the first to become unjust." A definition of a puritan of any age is one who's greatest fear is that somewhere, someone, is having fun.

Today I want to bring you once again the joy surprises.

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is one we don't read very often. It gets crowded out by the stories of the manger and the wise men. It's called Mary's

Magnificat, her song of praise. It is very unlikely that a young unmarried girl, spontaneously, said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." The song, like me the elf, really comes from somewhere else.

In this case Mary's Magnificat is the echo of an ancient song from the Old Testament uttered by Hannah when she gave birth to her son Samuel.

Mary's song quickly goes on to speak more about hope and justice and peace than about new babies. She sings, "God's mercy is for those who love God, from generation to generation; God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

I particularly like that, because there's nothing like me showing up in a cloud of smoke to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

Mary continues, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

I love those words. They are what I think of when I look up at those stars in the center of this sanctuary, all made by the hands of the children of this church.

Those simple signs of surprise are in store (or in star) for each of us here.

Think of what a surprise those stars were on the first Sunday you saw them here. Remember that the biggest thing about faith is that it opens us to surprises.

I want you to know that I have not had the Advent I had planned. For eleven months I was stashed away with the Christmas decorations (by mistake by the way. I'm supposed to be carefully hidden away in my own box in a special closet). Since I was unpacked I have been stuck backwards, upside down, and my head or feet hanging over the rafters.

Nobody even mentioned me last Sunday. I haven't even done my Christmas cards, which is a big demerit for an elf.

I had no idea if and how I'd get down from those rafters and talk to you this year. Then shazam, I drifted down in my parachute, and here I am.

Today is a day to simply be open to surprises. These are hard times. Every one here has had some brokenness in your lives. It's still a tough economy. Some of us don't know how we're going to make it to next month. All of us long to fix the pain of those we love the most. And if it's not personal, it's the brokenness of the wars of our world, the harsh lives of the homeless in our own town, and all injustices and cruelties we have to shut our eyes and ears to in order to sleep at night.

Elves tend to appear in hard times. Notice all the elf movies, elf TV shows, and elf books these days. In tough times we need to see places where some of the qualities of God become visible and real. Like angels, elves appear when God may seem too distant to reach or even call.

I simply want you to remember that God still has some very good surprises in store for you and me. Our only job is to unclench our determined fists, relax our grim set lips, and be open to the surprises God unleashes. It's the only way that elves, or God for that matter, can get into your hearts. The poet says the surprises come in simple speech, and song, and framing salutations. And to that I frame my salutation to you, with wishes and prayers for a surprisingly Merry Christmas.

Prayer -

Pause now on this last Sunday before Christmas, the day before the Winter Solstice, the longest night and shortest day of the year, and let this be a moment of peace in the midst of everything that is noisy and rushed. Take a minute to breathe deeply and relax every part of your body from your head to your feet.

Cares and duties may linger, but reassure them as you would reassure an anxious child that you will get back to them.

Think of three qualities of God that you would like to be visible in you in the coming week. Now pray that their light may shine in you, lighting your own darkness. Now pray that they may shine through you into the darkness of the world.

See these qualities becoming visible in you, magnifying the Lord in you, letting all your hopes and dreams shine. Pray that you may find your shining star of hope, and that through you God's shining star will shine to others in need. Pray for kindness to flow through you, and that through you hope will become as contagious as a Christmas cold.

Amen.