

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our God is a God of surprises! He most consistently surprises us with the arrival of a child. Let's face it! Most of us were not planned by our parents. Many of us were unexpected. And, invariably, few of us arrived at a time or in a place that was convenient.

I look back with some amusement at how some of these Surprises of God arrived in our family. My oldest sister, Margaret Mary, was delighted with the arrival of her first-born, Joseph, just about ten months after her wedding. She was happy, but a little concerned when Andrew, Jr. arrived ten months after Joseph. And she and her husband, Andy, were on the verge of panic when Lisa arrived ten months after young Andrew.

At Lisa's baptism, Andy asked my Mother, "Mom, what are we going to do? We can't go on like this." My Mother, being a woman of great wisdom, asked Andy, "Do you still have that army cot?" He said, "Yes!" She said, "Good! Set it up in the basement and you sleep down there."

Well, I don't know that he did. But, if he did, apparently he snuck out of the basement at some point because Julia arrived a couple of years later.

Now, my sister, Louise (she's the one that delighted in sharing moments of my childhood traumas at the Anniversary celebration), is another story. She had two miscarriages in the early years of her marriage. But, in short order, she was blessed with Lainie, Carla, John, Edward, and Robert. After Robert's birth, she announced that she thought she knew what she was doing wrong.

Well, whatever she was doing wrong, she must have been doing right, because in rather quick succession, Donna, and then, Carrie arrived.

However, no matter how much God surprised my family or any other family, Zechariah and Elizabeth had to be the most surprised couple of all time.

They had desperately wanted children all of their lives. But none was forthcoming. According to the Scripture, they "were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly." Yet, they were not blessed with children. At that time to remain childless was seen as a "curse". Not only did it suggest that they were not favored by God, but, more practically, it meant that there would be no one to care for them in their old age.

Zechariah then takes his turn to do his priestly duty and offer incense to God for the people of the community. The angel arrives and tells him that in fact he has found favor with God who has heard his prayer and is granting him his deepest desire. He will have a son.

Then, Zechariah makes a big mistake. He asks the angel for a sign. There's a great warning in this for us. When God surprises you and grants what you've prayed for, don't ask for a sign. You see, what happened to Zechariah, was that he was struck mute. He could not speak.

Now this was a problem because when the priest emerged from the sanctuary he was to offer a prayer for the people and share whatever word God gave him to speak. Imagine, a preacher struck mute! What a catastrophe!

When Zechariah comes out of the sanctuary, all he can do is gesticulate wildly, perhaps even break into a happy dance, and had a great big smile on his face, and, perhaps, tears running down his cheeks.

Some gathered for the service thought maybe he had a vision; others probably thought he had a stroke, and maybe there were even others who thought he had a break-down and went crazy.

But, that was nothing compared to what probably happened when he went home to Elizabeth and tried to let her know what he was told in the sanctuary. Remember, he couldn't speak. All he could do was make signs. This is where I think it must have gotten pretty hilarious.

You have to remember that Elizabeth and Zechariah, we are told in the Scriptures, were old, that is, beyond child-bearing age. So, they were at least in their late 40's or maybe 50's. However, since God really wanted to make a statement, they were more than likely in their 60's or 70's.

Now, how is poor, old Zechariah going to communicate to Elizabeth that they have to make a baby. First of all, she's upset he can't speak. And then, well more than likely, he starts making all kinds of amorous approaches to her. Can't you hear her saying something like, "Get away from me, you old fool. Get your hands off me. Have you lost the last piece of your mind." Somehow or another old Zechariah gets a fire burning in the old woman, lights a spark and thus John the Baptist is born.

In our first reading at the Vigil Mass, the Prophet, Jeremiah, put these words in the mouth of God, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you." And the Psalmist declares, "On you I depend from birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength." In the first reading for Sunday's Mass, the Prophet, Isaiah, proclaims, "The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name," and again, "Now, the Lord has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb." And, finally, in the 139th Psalm for Sunday's Mass we hear, "O Lord you have probed me and you know me; you know when I sit and when I stand; you understand my thoughts from afar. My journeys and my rest you scrutinize; with all my ways you are

familiar. Truly you have formed my inmost being; you know me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works. My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you when I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth."

When we string all these utterances of God's Word together, and we hear them spoken to each of us individually and collectively, the great Surprise is that from before the beginning of time, God knew us, has planned for us, and has a purpose for us. And God has heard all of our excuses. Jeremiah already complained, "Ah, Lord, I am too young." And God replied, "Say not that you are too young." When Isaiah moaned about being tired and unappreciated, "...though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly spent my strength." God said, "I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Zechariah and Elizabeth thought that their work was done. They were too old to do anything worth-while, but God said, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

So, all I am asking of you tonight, is to be opened to whatever surprise God has in mind for you. He knows what you see as your limitations. They don't interest God. God has already heard all the excuses you might offer—I'm too old; I'm too young; I'm too tired; I've done my share; I'm comfortable where I am, don't bother me—and God is unimpressed. God still has work for each of us and for all of us. It is God's plan. We are to do the work of John the Baptist "to turn hearts toward the children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous to prepare a people fit for the Lord." Through Isaiah, God speaks to us, "I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

So, be open, be ready, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, God is a God of Surprises. He may well have a surprise in store for you.