

It's been another week of activities, between BREXIT and the imminent release of the vaccine against the Corona virus, both drowning our journey through Advent. Our theme, **God Surprises!** comes from the Iona Community's 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.**

In the 11-week series, **"Who is God?"** we discovered, in the words of a popular hymn:

No one else can touch my heart like You do,  
I can search for all eternity, Lord  
And find, there is none like You.  
Your mercy flows like a river wide,  
And healing comes from Your hand.  
Suffering children are safe in Your arms,  
There is none like You<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed! There is none like our God. Should we then be surprised, He answers prayer? This is our question today.

The Christmas story teaches us a lot about **Prayer**.

It starts with a narrative running in the background.

A priest, Zechariah is chosen for special privilege of burning incense in the inner Temple, in the "Holy of Holies", when he is startled by the presence of an Angel. No one else is supposed to be in there. The Angel says, "*Your*

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Lenny LeBlanc (Publisher/Copyrights: Integrity's Hosanna! Music). Inspired by Jeremiah 10:6  
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*prayer has been heard. Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son. You will name him John.”*

The Angel did not say, *Your prayer has been heard and will be answered*. God hears **all** prayer. The answer to our prayer lies in the **plan**, the **will** and the **timing** of God.

The Priest and his wife have been praying for a child, and have accepted, it was not in the will of God they should have a child. The Angel did say, *Your prayer has been heard...* When you were praying, God has heard. The time has now come for your wife to bear you a son. What the Angel **then said** is crucial to our understanding of prayer.

First, *YOU will have great joy and gladness!* God delights in answering our prayer; nothing delights God more than our joy and happiness. Others see our joy and rejoice, that God answered our prayer.

The Angel continues, this your son “*will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. He will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the Spirit and Power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.*”

We often make the mistake of down-grading ourselves before God. *I am not worth God's interest in me. ... Why does God think I am special when everything and everyone around me says I am not?* God has breathed His Spirit in each one of us, **at birth**. He has planned our lives, just as He planned Zechariah and Elisabeth's son, John's life. Too often, we want to shape our lives and our direct our destiny; God will, however, achieve His plans, sadly through others.

Zechariah's life teaches us two more important points about prayer. First, it is futile trying to frustrate, trying to redirect God's plans. When God told Abraham he would have a son, he looked at his age and his wife's age and fell for the trap of fathering a child through another woman, a custom in his world during his time. Thousands of years later, after many have

made the same error in judgement, Zechariah too says, *but my wife and I are too old! How can this happen?* God's ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts, His plans are not achieved through the knowledge and reasoning of human minds.

Second, Zechariah teaches us what to do **WHEN** God answers prayer: to thank Him with praise!<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Zechariah did not pray, *Thank you Lord for giving us a son in our old age!* He thanked God for **prophecy** that was being fulfilled, he thanked God for His **promises** that were being realised before their very eyes, and he **affirmed** what the Angel had said about the boy.

God created the world and populated it with various life forms, and God gave us life with a plan to be custodians of the world. So, when we pray asking God, He answers in the context of His plan for the world and for us. Our frustration with God arises when we want Him to serve us and our needs, without consideration for His plans.

The second prayer we examine is that of a young girl, Mary. True to the custom of her day, she would have been 16 or 18 years old, engaged to be married to a man who had completed his apprenticeship as a carpenter. In the world of their time, an engagement was a solemn promise to be husband and wife. The way out of an engagement was a *writ of divorce*.

Mary would have been dreaming of and planning for life together as husband and wife, when her dreams were interrupted. The Angel's message shattered her life: *to have a child when I have not yet started living with my husband?*

Yet she replied, *"I surrender to God's will. Let your Word to me be fulfilled".*<sup>3</sup>

She was so disturbed and shattered by the Angel's message, she decided to visit cousin Elisabeth, a very natural thing for a young girl to do, to offer

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:67-79

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:38

help during the pregnancy of an older family member. Perhaps time with her, to talk about the miracle in her life, would help Mary process what was happening to her.

As she entered her home, Elisabeth's greeting was the words generations of women of child-bearing age would have longed to hear, prophetic words being fulfilled: *"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ... Blessed are you special woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!"*

Mary's response? *My soul magnifies the Lord! My very being is bursting with God's joy. Look what has happened, I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, God whose very name is Holy, set me apart from all others. His mercy flows in, wave after wave, embracing those who are in awe before him.*

*... He embraced His chosen child, Israel; He remembered and piled on His mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what He promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

What a beautiful prayer of submission and surrender - *not what I want and desire, but let Your plans being fulfilled in and through me.*

We could go on and examine Joseph's prayer, *"as he (took time to) consider these things (Mary's unexpected pregnancy, an out-of-this-world explanation) in his mind"*<sup>4</sup>. We do not know how long he waited, but during the time he took to consider his actions, Joseph positioned himself to hear from God in a most unusual manner, in a dream.

Joseph's response? *"When Joseph woke up, (not counting the huge social cost of his action and his reputation) He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream, he brought Mary home as his wife."*<sup>5</sup>

He did what was right and honourable before God!

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:20

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:24

And there was Simeon, who lived in prayerful expectancy of seeing God's Saviour for Israel. On the day Mary and Joseph brought forty-day old Jesus into the Temple for a thanksgiving offering, Simeon took Him into his arms and blessed God. Imagine living in the Temple, watching parents day-after-day bring their child, praying for discernment to recognise the One is the Saviour of Israel. Then comes the day when the Holy Spirit directs him to Mary and Joseph. He praises God for answering his prayer, not for personal satisfaction that his prayer was answered rather, *my eyes have seen Your salvation ... the One who is a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory of your people, Israel.*

That God answers prayer is known to each of us. **BUT** we do not see God answering prayer, nor do we experience the joy of answered prayer unless two things fall into place:

1. we live in total surrender to Him, and
2. accept the fact that His response to our prayer, which may be long in coming, is in keeping with His plan and His timing.

**God surprises earth with heaven,  
Coming here on Christmas Day.**

God surprised us with His timing. He also surprises us with answered prayer, but wants us to be surrendered to His will and His timing, ready with a song of praise when it happens!

What prayer of surrender will you offer this Christmas?

**AMEN.**