

Luke 2:1-7

I have a question for you today: What do the TV shows “Father Knows Best” “Bill Cosby,” “Family Ties” and “The Nativity Story” all have in common? They are all classic family “situation comedies.”

If you use the classical distinction between tragedy and comedy, the Bible has many “situation comedies.” Tragedy implies inevitability. It’s about fate moving toward a predictable, usually sad, ending.

Comedy is about the unexpected or the impossible happening, bringing laughter. It’s when the underdog wins the game in a way nobody could have predicted and everyone cheers because it’s a happy ending brought about through a series of impossible events.

There are tragic dimensions in the Bible, but essentially the Bible is about comedy, because it's about surprises. Compared with other histories, Israel's history appears to have been written by Mel Brooks. It records all the foibles, all the mistakes, and all the sins of all the people. It begins, incredibly, like the beginning of a bad joke: “There was this 99 year old man named Abraham and his 90-year-old wife, Sarah, who were told, ‘You're going to have a baby.’” But wait, there’s more! God promised, “Through this child I will multiply your descendants and covenant to be your God and you shall be my people. I will always be with you.” They laughed.

And we can laugh, too. Anyone in their right mind will laugh at the promises of God, because they are so incredible, so contrary to expectations. In the real world, the world in which you and I live, the promises of God will almost always appear ludicrous.

The Bible says that's the way God rules history and that’s why some theologians point out that from a literary point of view, the Bible is really comedy. It is filled with stories with happy endings evolved though a series of unexpected, incredible, and sometimes heart-rending, events. You can see that especially in the Christmas story.

If surprise is the unexpected, amazement is being astounded at what we see or hear. Actually, both words are appropriate for the nativity story. Let’s look at it again.

Last week we read about Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she, of all the women in the world, was to be the mother of the promised Messiah. That’s when we’re first supposed to laugh, or at least gasp in amazement. Mary was a woman. Angels appeared only to men in that patriarchal society.

Here’s another chuckle, Mary wasn’t an older married woman like Sarah. She was a virgin. This is pointed out not so much to describe her sexual status as to indicate she was very young. That's the surprise—she was just an unmarried adolescent. This was a surprisingly new and different situation.

Another surprise was when the angel told the shepherds that these glad tidings of great joy would be for all people, not just the Jews. The coming of the Messiah meant God’s promise to Abraham was now open to everyone. By faith we can all become God’s people and because of God’s loving sacrifice, we can be assured

of a wonderful future. So the story of the birth of the Messiah is told the same way as the story of Abraham and Sarah, because it's about the same promise.

You want more surprises? Who would have guessed the Messiah would be born in a dirty stable with animals as the attendants and dirty, socially-unacceptable shepherds as the first visitors?

But we celebrate the beginning of Jesus' story because it was a monumental, even laughable moment, when the God of the universe humbled Himself by taking on human form as a helpless baby. The future Savior of the world, the King of Kings, lay wrapped in swaddling clothes, born to a peasant, not to royalty. What's God doing? Something new, that's what. It makes the "rest of God's story" even more wonderful and surprising. The nativity story was so unpredictably funny many at the time couldn't believe it. And, many still can't believe it today.

Even the preliminary events of the birth of Jesus seemed ordinary at the time, but were surprisingly important to the success of God's plan. Some said the coming of the Messiah was late, but funny as it may seem, it was at just the right moment in history. I've often said, "God may be slow, but God is never late." Chuck Swindoll reviews some of the amazing "behind the scenes" organization that went into Jesus' birth.

First, some natural means of common communication was needed, a familiar tongue to spread the Gospel quickly. Enter Alexander the Great, father of "koine" Greek, which he established every place he conquered. The early evangelists and apostles used this Greek and the surprising story was heard far and wide.

Also, decent roads were needed to get to Bethlehem and later to get to other towns to spread the Gospel story. Enter the Romans and their military takeovers. Good roads were built to move their armies. These roads created a far-reaching empire that allowed reasonable peace for travel for many years.

The prophets said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth, miles away. Enter greedy Caesar Augustus. What else besides a government decree to go to your hometown to be counted for taxes would force a nine-month pregnant woman to travel days by donkey to Bethlehem?

So thanks to good roads, a decision in Rome, and a bothersome tax census, Jesus' birth happened at just the right place, at just the right time...and with an articulate common language to share the good news. A little baby the world hardly noticed arrived, but people and events were in God's hands. Since then, mighty Caesars and Herods have fallen, but God has continued to exalt the peasant woman's Child throughout the world. What will they think up next?!

So what does this say to us today? Luke wants us to look at our history God's way—through God's eyes, looking for the surprises! Perhaps we are looking for God to act in our lives the ways we have seen God act in other lives or the way theologians say God will act. Maybe it won't be that way for us at all. Maybe it will be surprisingly different.

We have to remember Gabriel's message to Mary which is the Bible's philosophy of history: "Nothing is impossible with God." So be cautious saying:

"This isn't the right time." "I'm not the right person." "It's never going to happen." "It's never been done that way before." All of these phrases have been used to dismiss God's entering our world. God just loves it when we set things up for Him that way. That's when the unexpected happens.

That doesn't mean we won't experience pain, disappointments or problems. Mary had to endure the gossip of being an unwed, pregnant adolescent, to endure physical hardship in travel and birth, to endure seeing the love of her heart being crucified on a cross, not knowing it wasn't the end of the story. That was when the greatest surprise of all time was waiting to unfold: the Resurrection. Our pain is not the end of our story either because God is with us and is sovereign over all things.

One year a woman wrote a Christmas letter telling her story. It was the first Christmas since her husband died. In the letter she was honest about her pain and sorrow. Then she said this:

"I wonder about many things: How can it be that he who is dead continues to live and minister to me and to the children? How is it that in the midst of heartache I found in God the power to keep going? How is it that as a result of this tragedy old friendships are deepened and new friendships are formed?"

She ended the letter by saying the mystery of Christmas held the answers because "Christmas is the promise that God can be trusted to meet all our needs in ways we would never imagine." Her closing words were: "Some say this first Christmas without your husband will be very painful. Probably it will be. But without Christmas my life would be impossible."

Without Christmas all of our lives would be impossible. We, too, may come to a point when we think all hope is lost, but God is always working in our lives. As the poet said, "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform." God promised everything would be all right in the end. So, if it's not all right, it's not the end! Let me repeat, **If it's not all right, it's not the end.**

So, whether you think you're living in an action drama, a tragedy, or a true situation comedy, put God in charge of your life, trust God—and wait expectantly.

Because of God's amazing promises, we'll always have "the last laugh."