

"CHRISTMAS SURPRISE"

Christmas Eve, 2018

Luke 2:1-14

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the traveler's inn.

There were shepherders camping in the vicinity. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for the whole world: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights,

Peace to all people on earth who love the Lord.

In 1964, Mattel Company introduced a craft toy onto the US market. It was called "The Thingmaker." Along with its cousins, "Creepy Crawlers" and "Creepie People," it was all the rage as a Christmas present that year. I HAD to have one. And I let it be known.

I wrote notes to my parents explaining in great lawyerly detail why their 8-year old daughter NEEDED and SHOULD have this toy for Christmas. I left hints in the kitchen, on their pillows, in their car, and in their bathrooms.

I wrote a letter to Santa Clause about my need for this item, and I ccd: my parents at the bottom. There was NO WAY they could not have known what I wanted for Christmas that year.

What is a Thingmaker you might ask? It was a table top heating element. It came with about a dozen metal molds stamped into rectangular shapes with metal handles so you could put the mold on and off the burner. It also came with a rainbow of colored goop that you would pour into the mold. Then you would bake it for a number of minutes on the burner. Using a toothpick after it cooled, you would slow...ly pull it out of the mold in its now gelled form. After it cooled, you would have a lifelike rubberized bug or snake, funny face, or other toy. It was the coolest thing ever!

I started my Thingmaker/Creepy Crawler/and Creeple Peeple campaign in the summer of that year, and I never let up. There was no way my parents could mess this up.

My mom and dad had a fun tradition in the days leading up to Christmas. They cordoned off a piece of our basement and called it, "Santa's Workshop." We were not allowed to go in there, especially after the year my brother accidentally discovered the model train village our dad had been building late at night for weeks!

In Santa's Workshop, my parents alone-- there might have been some alcohol down there, I am not sure--wrapped our Christmas gifts. When one was completed, one of them would yell up the stairs to the child for whom the gift was intended, "Special Delivery for _____" and that kid would run down to receive their present to put under the tree until Christmas morning.

The four of us kids sat at the top of the stairs waiting for our names to be called. My parents were very careful to call each of us one by one so that no one felt slighted. We all had the exact same number of gifts. My parents were no dummies.

This process would go on for hours, or maybe 15 minutes, I'm not quite sure, but it was family fun for all.

The year of the Thingmaker, we were all poised at the top of the stairs and I was giddy with excitement to see the box that I could guess was my long-awaited special gift.

I think that's how it is with us every Christmas. We are 2017 or 18 years removed from the story of Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus, yet we listen each year to the story - or stories- of his birth and we know how it ends. We know already what is in the specially wrapped Bible gift that we are given each year.

Not a Thingmaker perhaps, but something even better comes to us each Christmas. We get the hope of Jesus. We get pure love from above. We get someone who we can study all the next year, someone pure and holy and unsullied by the harshness of this world.

We get in alternating years the Magi or the Shepherds. This year, we get the shepherds "tending their flocks by night," visited by angels singing gloriously in the sky, telling them of the wonderful news that they no longer have to be afraid. They get to hear right from Gabriel's mouth that God loves them. It's a special story that is Luke's version of the birth of Jesus.

If you were here in church yesterday, you heard our children stand up by our nativity scene here and explain that Baby Jesus came to the manger on a camel, that the shepherds had their sheep at the scene to help the baby sleep, that the donkey's name in the barn was most certainly Eeyore, and that the baby was given gold so his parents could buy him the things he

needed like diapers and a blanket. Thank goodness for our children, for otherwise, we might be SO CONFUSED by the Christmas story!

The Christmas story is magical, no doubt. Wise men, strange men from the East, men who don't even know or worship God, are chosen in Matthew's version to bring special gifts to this special child. Magical! But strange...

Shepherds—nobodies—who move in and then out of Luke's story, are given the same privilege of witnessing angels and a newborn's soft cooing. They have no gifts to give to Joseph and Mary or the baby Jesus other than their gentle hearts. We know nothing about them either. They might or might not know God before the angels break into their lives, and we never encounter them again in the Biblical text. Magical! But also strange...

It's so much fun to have children tell the Baby Jesus story. There's always magic in their telling. Some of their connections are indeed strange to us adults, for we know the story inside and out—we know it so well. But do we? Our nativity set here has both Luke's and Matthew's versions wrapped up into one scene, when they actually are a melding together of two entirely different Gospel accounts.

Each year we hear a different version and as happens with the Bible, maybe each year we pick up on a piece of the story or an insight that didn't register with us before. That's the Christmas surprise! What might it be for you this year?

This year for me, I am really listening to what the angel is telling the shepherds. The angel says to them something like, "Let's remember that we have God to thank for all our blessings, and let's seek peace in the world, oh beloved people who love God." Is this a message for the year zero as much as for the people of year 2019? I think so. We sure need peace these days—in our hearts, in our families, in our extended relationships, and especially with those who we disagree. The angel doesn't make

distinctions. Peace everywhere! I hear them say. I hear that message loud and clear this year. It's my Christmas surprise....

That Christmas of 1964, I waited patiently at the top of the stairs for my turns to come around for Special Delivery for Tracey. I ran down the stairs and walked up with what was clearly a clothing box, a shoe box, a board game box, and an-I-don't-know-what-but-it's-definitely-NOT-a-Thingmaker-box. I was getting quite discouraged and quite put-out. I was completely ungrateful for what I was receiving, so intent was I on the THING I REALLY WANTED.

I'm sure my parents were having a grand time messing with me. They were making me wait for my Thingmaker, teasing me with other things they knew I wouldn't care about. I wasn't counting on Santa that year, for reasons I won't go into, so I knew this was my shot- my parents had better come through!

I knew we were winding down the gift frenzy, as I had seen the BIG packages come up the stairs for my siblings. Then my dad called up to me one more time, "Special Delivery for Tracey!" I ran downstairs and grabbed the last package. This could really be it! I thought as I tore back upstairs, filled with anticipation for the next morning, for this one, this one, could really be it!

I glanced at the wrapping paper and then I looked at it harder. It was that cheap kind...the kind you can see through...and there it was, my Thingmaker. Underneath that flimsy wrapping paper was the one item I had wanted for months, the only gift I was interested in unwrapping that Christmas.

The surprise was ruined. The excitement was gone. The Christmas morning angels breaking into life and singing "Hallelujah! God is good! Tracey got her Thingmaker!" would have no reason to come to our house that year.

We may think we have this Jesus story all figured out. I've heard it for 62 years now many times each year. You can do your own math. We may think there's no more Special Deliveries coming to us, no angels winging and singing to us from the skies, no wise mysterious travelers coming our way this year to bring us impractical and bizarre gifts.

We may not be attended by magical camels or shepherds with sheep. We may have heard it all, experienced it all, lived it all for all these Christmases.

Yet, our stories continue to speak to us. It's a strange thing about these Bible stories—they are the living, breathing, still speaking voice of God's love come to save us from our folly that we think we know it all already, come to find us where we are, come to make our lives richer, our faith stronger, and our purpose in this world clearer.

So this Christmas, let the magic come touch you. Let the stories you hear tonight in word and song and prayer change you. Ask your children or grandchildren or other small people in your life to tell you the Christmas story.

Don't be so clever, brothers and sisters in faith. If I had been three years old or if I had received my gifts with the pure innocence of a babe, I wouldn't have blown my Thingmaker surprise.

God has much in store for us. Let's all be children tonight.