

1) Has anyone ever given you a gift that was a total and complete surprise?

You had absolutely no idea that it was coming—No idea of what it would be.

Often the gifts we get are other kinds:

- The I knew exactly what it was, because it's what I asked for gift.
We tear off the paper, and say *Surprise! Surprise!* because—Oh GOOD, it's NO surprise.
- Or we get the I was hoping for it, but afraid you wouldn't get it for me gift.
Our worry, upon receipt, dissolving in relief.
- Or the thanks anyway gift.
We don't much care for it, expected or not—
but it doesn't much matter—it's the thought that counts.
- Then there is the Oh Dear! This is much nicer than what I got for YOU gift.
Surprising—maybe—but in a most anxiety producing sort of way.
- But the: Out of the blue—Where did THAT come from—NOW what! gift?
It can be hard to know how to handle a gift like that.

It stretches the imagination—challenges our world—exciting—scary.

Once I received cross country skis for Christmas. Athletically inept as I am; it was one scary gift.

Have YOU ever received a profoundly surprising, totally unexpected gift?

Not necessarily under a Christmas tree, beside a birthday cake, or on an anniversary.

But whenever, from wherever and from whomever it came,
a gift that left you wide-eyed—gave your world a tumble?

Maybe the gift wasn't a THING wrapped up, but an INSIGHT or an IDEA, a FRIEND or a LOVER.

Maybe what found its way to you was not at all what you were looking for, or wanted.

But because you got it—after catching your breath and getting adjusted to it—

you've ended up saying: *WHAT a SURPRISE that was; and WHAT a GIFT it has been!*

2) Today we meet some people who got gifts like that just dropped on them.

Meet King David—a probably quite befuddled King David.

Just yesterday he was planning on being the one to be the gift giver.

A “thank you” gift to the very nice God who had helped him establish his own reign as king.
David figures he owes God a favor, since God has favored him.

And he'd like to ensure that God will keep on doing him favors as good or better.

And building God a great big house will cloak David's decrees in religious respectability—
send a signal, loud and clear, that the will of God is anything King David might want.

Thanks, but no thanks, God says. I don't do "you scratch my back, I'll scratch your back" gifts. I'm giving you a gift instead, David—a gift on my terms and priorities, not on yours. I will give you a long line of royal successors, all of whom will be responsible to me—and responsible for their people's welfare—especially those who can't afford to give gifts that might purchase them power.

3) Well, suffice it to say that neither King David nor his sons or his great-great grandsons do a lot of good with this gift that God gives them.

It's a gift they squander, by and large, at great cost to the people they rule.

This gift from God is pretty much wasted—one might even say seriously misplaced. BUT—now meet someone as unlike King David as you can imagine—a peasant girl named Mary.

It's quite the gift Gabriel shows up to announce—you might call it a total surprise. What God will do, Gabriel tells Mary, is re-purpose that original gift to David, so misused by so many kings; and to give it—well—both TO her and THROUGH her. It's not uncommon at Christmas to focus on the boy child Jesus whom she subsequently bears, and to exclaim: *WHAT A GIFT—Costly—Scary—Surely—Yet Wonderful, Indeed!*

But to focus exclusively on that Holy Infant, so tender and mild, would be, I think, not to appreciate fully yet another dimension of this gift that God is giving.

God takes Mary—a young, poor, powerless woman, a woman who lives under layer upon layer of oppressive patriarchal privilege—and God “overshadows” her—not imposing divine will upon her, but gently surrounding her with an all-encompassing protective compassion.

Together, Mary and God find a totally new, utterly impossible, completely unexpected way, of doing what David and his sons could never manage to contemplate—

that is, to PARTICIPATE—participate as mutually giving partners—

God and Mary—working together for the welfare of the world.

It would not be a stretch to suggest that this divine-human partnership is profoundly surprising—regardless of the fact that we celebrate it in a Season of Surprises every year.

4) And if such partnering seems to Mary (or, perhaps, to us) as just too impossibly good to be true, meet Elizabeth, a relative and soul sister of Mary.

She doesn't know “just how Mary feels” but she has a fair idea.

Mary bursts in on Elizabeth, after traveling toward her on a hurried, one hundred mile hike; and the two of them immediately set to—swapping stories of surprise.

They are so different, these two—a very old woman and a very young one,
a woman of relatively solid social standing, and a woman with no standing at all.
a long-married woman, and a woman betrothed but not yet a wife.

But they have, each growing in them, the Surprise of God, and that bonds them to each other.
In the presence of the angel, Mary, not surprisingly, seems only to pause and ponder
as she moves her way from *How CAN this be?* to *LET it be!*

But as she is enfolded in Elizabeth's embracing welcome,
it seems to sink in that Mary has, in fact, really, truly, been partnered with God.
ELIZABETH'S overshadowing of her enables her to feel in body and soul, mind and spirit,
that GOD has overshadowed her—and is—and will.

Elizabeth partners with God, in helping Mary believe, deep down, that she is now God's partner.
What can Mary do but sing out her deep surprise.

(Sometimes singing a surprise is the best way, the only way to sense it deeply and share it fully.)
Mary sings of a kind of power that is the very opposite
of what King David thought that God had given him, and he'd give God right back.

But of course, the power of which Mary sings is the kind of power
that God has had in mind since Way Back When.

It isn't power OVER, but power WITH—a partnering, participating power.

A kind of power that cannot be released without—well—partners and participants.

I kind of imagine that when Mary says: *Yes*, that God says: *YES!!!*

And that God says: *YES!!!* Again, when Elizabeth says: *YES!* to Mary's *Yes*.

5) By their very nature, surprises are surprising. (If we tell each other *Surprise me!* it doesn't work.)

But there is good reason why Christians celebrate this Season of Surprises every year.

For all our current cultural fixation on creating for ourselves

attention grabbing or attention distracting experiences

of the new and different, the immediate and unexpected;

there is a growing, settling sense—is there not—that while we may be startled, even shocked,
nothing truly surprises us anymore—we've been there, done that, there are no surprises left.

Don't bet on it. It's still Advent when we, in faith and longing, anticipate God's unexpected gift.

When will it come, and where, and how? No point in squinty eyed guessing.

But here may be a clue—whenever, wherever, however it comes

God's completely unexpected, totally surprising gift will invite, require, and make possible
our own partnering, our own participation—exciting—scary—humbling—rewarding.

Let it be, unto us, O Gracious God, according to Your Word.