

God gave the world thousands of years to prepare for the coming Messiah. The prophets shared promises and clues and yet, when that holy moment came, the world was “in the dark,” and everyone was surprised.

Even with all of that planning, no one expected a baby. Mary and Joseph had not yet completed plans for their wedding. Shepherds were busy in the fields caring for sheep. Bethlehem was preoccupied with Caesar's census and the village was full to the brim with relatives and guests. No one expected a baby.

Even the faithful people who loved God and believed the prophets' promises were not expecting a baby. Everyone was waiting for a full-grown king. A Messiah. One who would chase out the Romans and restore peace. Someone like David or Solomon! But no one expected a baby.

Is it any different today? Where do we look for answers? For power? For hope? No matter how faithful it is easy to be distracted by normal, daily stuff. We wonder about the future of our nation. We worry about the violence and hatred that never seems to go out of fashion. Our vision is fixed on the strength of our retirement savings. Or our marriage and children. Or our job. We seek someone to give what we want or roll up our sleeves and try to do it ourselves. But who would ever ask a baby to tackle such a difficult world?

If you would ask one hundred people “what could make their future perfect and peaceful,” I guarantee you no one would expect it to be a baby. Who would pin all of their hopes and dreams for the future on a baby? And so, of all things we could gather to discuss today, we surround what came as a complete surprise to the world ... the birth of a baby.

When the peace of Eden was shattered, and that garden of delights became a desert of disappointment and death, God began to plan for a new creation. And in that moment, God began to share a promise, not to destroy, but to find a way to bring a rebellious world back from the brink. He would send a Savior.

The same Word that said “*sunrise and sunset*” ... “*puppy dog and elephant*” ... “*mountain and ocean*” now said, “I promise to save you from yourselves.” But who would have expected that Word to take the shape of a baby?

Once there was a man who saw Christmas and said only “humbug!” He was not scrooge and loved everything about the holiday but thought the

idea of God as baby in manger beyond belief. He was too honest to pretend he believed, and when his wife and kids went to church on Christmas Eve, he always stayed home. He said, "I hope you understand I can't believe claim that God became man"

Each year wife invited and each year he said, "I would be hypocrite." I'll stay home but I'll wait up for you and the kids. This year, as everyone left in the car, he noticed snow was becoming heavy. "Finally," he said, "a white Christmas – that is what is important anyway!" He sat in chair by fire to read newspaper and waited for everyone to come home. Suddenly he heard a thud on the window! (Was it kids throwing snowballs?) He looked but saw no one. Then another thud. And another. The snow was so heavy he could see nothing else. Then another thud, and he saw a flock of birds huddled on their windowsills.

He wanted to help but couldn't figure out how. Then he had an idea. He went out to barn, where the kids kept their pony, and opened door to provide warm shelter for the birds. But they didn't move and shivered on the windowsills. He filled the barn with seeds, but they still stayed put. "I can't let these miserable birds die," he thought, "but how can I help?" He went out in storm, trying to shoo them into barn, but they scattered and went back to the windows huddled and shivering in the cold.

He realized they were afraid of him. "If only I was a bird, they would listen!" At that moment the church bells rang, and then he realized what he had said. He sank to his knees and said, "now I understand why God had to become a baby in a manger. Thank you, God! Now I know why YOU did what you did!

For years wise men, priests, and common folk wondered how this might happen. But no one expected a baby. All the wisdom of the world is centered on the mature, the fully developed, the strong, the wise, the glamorous, and the accumulation of earthly wealth -- and yet God's wisdom (that seems so foolish to us) had a better idea. A baby.

John's Gospel tells it this way: "And the Word became flesh!" The promise took on shape. It breathed. It squirmed. It smiled. God's promise came to life and light in the gift of new life. And what life is newer than a baby? What is fuller of hope and promise and life than a newborn baby?

What makes more sense than to begin the healing, the forgiving, the saving, and the reclaiming of life than at the beginning? And so, our rebirth began with a birth. John's language proclaims that the same powerful word that brought everything into being now lives among us.

That we would not fail to feel that love, this baby would grow and share the same hope and disappointments, the same hunger and sorrows, the same life and death that we share. *And God made that so abundantly clear as He touched every moment of life, from a living birth to a dying breath.* What a miracle God has gifted us with! And no one would have expected this to all begin with a baby.

We celebrate the greatest gift the world has ever seen. We stand in awe as we realize the wisdom of God. To conquer the powers and strength of this broken world He came as a helpless, defenseless, innocent baby. What irony! What justice! What love! Who would expect a baby to withstand the principalities and powers of sin and death? And yet ...He has!

That is what Jesus has come to do. In that shape of a baby, he announced the shape of his love. And He would win his victory for us in the same fashion: by washing feet, touching lepers, embracing the outcast and unloved, by surrendering out of love rather than dominating out of fear.

This baby would have one purpose in life: to embrace what all life must face and what all the living fear – death. And this baby grew into that role so that He could conquer what we cannot and would restore what we have lost. Who would have expected a baby would be the beginning of so much?

Celebrate the wonder of this miracle! A baby is the answer. A baby is the gift. A baby is the beginning of all life and hope and peace. Don't lose sight of the irony, and don't fail to feel the warmth of this loving embrace! *We live in a world where people want love without worrying about a baby! While God says it is only through a baby that we finally feel the fullness of God's love.*

No one expected a baby. No one deserves such love. Too often we have forgotten the miracle of this simple gift. It is certainly a miracle that brings us together today. A baby! A Savior! For you to snuggle and embrace and hold in your arms -- as surely as that loving God embraces you.

O holy night, indeed. O perfect love. And it all is wrapped in the swaddling cloth of a baby! Today the world is invited into a nursery, to smell the love and to prepare to carry this precious gift into the home of our daily lives!