

1. The Shepherd's Surprise--Luke 2:1-20 (Of course Luke gives us the most recognized account of the birth of Christ--it is the one Linus quotes in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. A key part of the story centers on the shepherds in the nearby fields and their visit by and "angel of the Lord" proclaiming this birth and then been accompanied by a heavenly host praising God together. It is a wonderful part of the story--but have you ever thought much about those shepherds? They were just hanging out with their sheep on a typical night's work when the angel surprised them. Initially Luke records that they were "terrified"--and that is easy to understand. But to be a part of the birth story of the Messiah--incredible!)
2. God of Surprises (But if there is one thing we know about our God--is that he has always been full of surprises--historically choosing the least likely, the fringe-folks to accomplish his will and these shepherds would seem to fit that--considered unclean by upstanding Jewish rabbis, most think of their work as undertaken by relatively unskilled labor. They were the very first ones to go spread the Good News about Jesus--so here again God used the least likely--but did he? Perhaps there is more to this story that provide a few surprises for us).
 - a. A house--not an inn? (first surprise--there likely was no "inn" as we think of it. Bethlehem was a tiny village of a few hundred folks and not positioned on any major roads--so likely no inn existed--no demand for a Holiday Inn Express. The word translated inn would be better translated "guest room." So it is more likely that Christ's birth happened at a house--maybe in a stable in the back of it or under it--since this is how they would have been positioned)
 - b. Temple shepherds? Micah 4:8; 5:2 (and here is where it really gets interesting. Yes, shepherds were considered unclean by Rabbi tradition, but one flock of sheep that pastured near Bethlehem was special and the shepherds were different--having been ritually cleansed to watch over the temple flock--the flock that was used to provide the Passover sacrifice. It was centered around a "tower of the flock" known as Migdal Eder and perhaps referenced in Micah 4:8 in a Messianic prophesy. These shepherds would take care of these sheep from birth--culling out the ones that were not suitable for a Passover sacrifice and keeping those that were--and get this--wrap them in swaddling clothes to protect and separate them when they were born in--yep--a manger. So could the shepherds visited by the angels have been these shepherd? If so--what fitting symbolism that those responsible for welcoming the Passover lambs into the world--would welcome THE Passover Lamb into the world. It would not have been difficult for them to understand and spread this word)
3. How Does God Still Surprise?
 - a. Through grace and forgiveness--Ephesians 2:8-9
 - b. Through providential moments--Esther 4:14
 - c. Through fresh insight into His Word--Lamentations 3:22-23
4. The Surprise of that Holy Night Remains (that God would visit us as he did and provide such a lamb to take away all of our sins. Couple that with the surprise of the resurrection and we find all reason--like the shepherds--to believe, to hope and to share. Just stop and consider the words of the heavenly host)
5. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (all who heard this story from the shepherds were amazed--I hope we still are--about a God whose favor rests upon us--and I hope that motivates us to do whatever we need to do to have a relationship with him--so that no surprise await us when we finally do come face-to-face with him)