

In the Turner family we have a tradition: Each Thanksgiving we draw names for giving gifts at Christmas. We used to keep it a secret who had which name, but we always found out long before the turkey got cold so now we tell. This year my brother Tom drew the name of my sister Mary. Tom said, "OK, Mary, what do you want?" She said, "Surprise me, but it better be good."

Mary's request is actually a prayer that has forever been on the lips of God's people. Long ago in Mesopotamia, the people prayed for a leader. "Surprise us, God," they prayed, "but it better be good." God sent them an old goatherder from the city of Ur named Abraham. He was a surprise, but he was very good. God founded the covenant with him.

Years later the Egyptians enslaved God's people. They cried for deliverance. "Surprise us, Lord, but it better be good." God sent them a tongue-tied shepherd who paradoxically had been raised as an Egyptian. Moses was a surprise, but he was a very good leader.

Going into the desert the people were hungry and thirsty; they despaired of ever seeing the Promised Land. They prayed for food, "Surprise us, Lord, but it better be good." God sent them bread from heaven and water from the rock. It surprised them, but it nourished them on the road to the River Jordan.

But then in the Promised Land they were attacked by the Philistines under the leadership of a giant warrior named Goliath. "We need a powerful soldier, Lord. Surprise us with one, but he better be good." God sent them a young boy with a slingshot named David. He was a surprise, but he was very, very good.

Afer the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites longed for a leader like David, a Messiah who would rebuild their home and bring them hope. "Surprise us, but it better be good." God sent a pregnant teenage virgin who gave birth in a stable. The child was a surprise, but he was the best.

My brothers and sisters, we all need a Messiah. We need freedom. We need food. We need direction. We need hope. We need peace. Each Advent we offer the same prayer, "Surprise us, Lord, but it better be good."

The third Sunday of Advent carries a one-word theme. "Rejoice!" The Lord is near, and his track record is good. When we call to the Lord from our need, he may surprise us, but he will be good.

God has drawn your name for Christmas. He loves you; he rejoices to have your name. He rejoices to fill the hearts of those who trust him. He will be very, very good.