

Surprise!

A Sermon Preached by the
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 Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
 Bloomington, Minnesota

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

We're going to stay with Father Abraham for a little while longer, and I'd like us to begin this morning with a prayer. This prayer is from a book entitled, "A Common Prayer," by Michael Leunig. It's one of my favorites; let us pray:

"God give us rain when we expect sun.
 Give us music when we expect trouble.
 Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
 Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
 Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
 God play with us, turn us sideways and around.
 Amen."

I'm sure this prayer is a favorite partly because of its whimsy, and partly because of its accompanying illustration, which I wish I could show you. It's a rather odd-looking little dog and an equally odd-looking little person gazing at one another with very puzzled expressions on their faces. Mostly I like it because it reminds me that God is still capable of surprise, usually when we least expect it. We all need to be reminded of that from time to time, especially when that stray dog shows up at the door!

Some of us like surprises – and some of us don't. Just as some of us like dogs, and some of us don't. I'm one of those people who like both surprises and dogs, and nothing would make me happier than to find a stray dog at my door one morning.

Scripture is full of unexpected surprises, for God is nothing if not the One who surprises. The story from Genesis that we read this morning is not just a good lesson in hospitality – although it is – it's also God sneaking up with another surprise for old Abraham, as if there hadn't been enough surprises already. And I love this story, not just because it's about surprise and hospitality and entertaining angels, but also because I'd like to think it may be a rather subtle attempt at humor on God's part. Sarah, for one, thought the idea that she might conceive and bear a child at the ripe old age of ninety was pretty funny. The text says that she "laughed to herself." My guess is that she laughed out loud. I know I would have! It was, after all, the last thing she expected.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner writes, "A good joke is one that catches you by surprise. God's for instance. Who would have guessed that Israel of all nations would be the

one God picked or Sarah would have Isaac at the age of ninety or the Messiah would turn up in a manger? Who could possibly see the duck-billed platypus coming or Saint Simeon Stylites or the character currently occupying the pulpit at (that Presbyterian church down the block)? The laugh in each case results from astonished delight at the sheer unexpectedness of the thing.”¹

And, by the way, if you’re not familiar with St. Simeon – and I wasn’t – he was a fifth century monk who lived for thirty-seven years on a small platform on top of a pillar somewhere in Syria. Who could have seen that one coming?

Others might say the same thing – Moses and Jonah, David, Elisha, Hannah and Elizabeth – although “astonished delight” might have been a stretch for some of them. And yet, in each instance, God’s surprise turned out to be transforming. We are reminded that God does indeed work in God’s own time, in God’s own way, and through whomever God chooses. Our problem is that we tend to limit God by our own expectations, and are often surprised when God calls us to something different, to something we might not have chosen.

For Abraham and Sarah, the unexpected visit from God was nothing less than life-changing. You can probably imagine the scene – Abraham dozing under the trees, trying to escape the heat of the day that plays tricks with your senses. Abraham, awakening to the presence of three visitors, possibly wondering if he was seeing a mirage, stumbling over himself in his haste to make them welcome. Desert hospitality required the offer of water to drink and wash with, a meal prepared to honor the unexpected guests, and Abraham was not one to ignore the presence of God.

One of the most recognized Russian Orthodox icons is one painted in the early fifteenth century by Andrei Rublev. It depicts this scene from Genesis, and it’s known as the Old Testament Trinity. If you’re familiar with it, you know that God was certainly in that place with Abraham. Here’s how one person describes it: “Three men wear sky blue clothing, indicating that they are persons come from heaven. To the left, the Father’s blue robe is nearly hidden by a shimmering cloak of gold. He grasps a staff of authority, and rising behind him are some of the many mansions in his house. The central figure also wears blue and brown, since, as the Son, he joins dirt and sky in one person. Two of his fingers point to the cup of his blood, and the terebinth behind him is the tree of the cross, the tree of life. On the right, the Spirit wears the green of grass and trees and living frogs, while his hand touches the table like the finger of God touching earth. Behind him is a mountain, the high place of all theophanies. . . . Meanwhile elderly Sarah stands at the doorway, the place of entry and exit, symbol of birth, where she hears the news that she will finally bear a son. It’s an hilarious thought, and Sarah laughs.”²

We’d like to believe, of course, that her laughter was that of absolute joy and disbelief. But for Sarah, the news might have been bittersweet. Her laughter might have been the ironic laughter of a once-beautiful woman whose hopes and dreams of a family died somewhere in the desert, a woman who followed her husband across miles and miles of desolate land, who

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, p. 67.

² Peter J. Leithart, “Blogging toward Sunday,” *Theolog*

had pretended to be his sister to save his life, had even given him her servant woman so they could have a child to carry their name, and now – now of all times, when she was finally settling into the “golden years” with Abraham, to be told that she would have a baby? Talk about being turned sideways and around!

For all that we know, or say that we know and understand about change, it's still one of the most difficult things for many of us to accept. My parents' generation often quoted that old proverb, “the only things you can count on are death and taxes.” My generation learned that the third thing you can count on is change. And not the “money back from a dollar” kind of change, but the changes that come with the loss of employment, moves across country, marriage, divorce, children, death, illness, the list goes on.

My children's generation understands that they will probably change careers at least twice in their lifetime, that they may not live in the same state or even the same country as their parents or siblings, that they will be even more transient as adults than they were as children, that change is inevitable. They know that you often get tears when you expect breakfast, and a stray dog when you expect congratulations. But while change can potentially cause some anxiety, stress, even depression, it can also be exciting. We know that the things we fear most in organizations, and perhaps especially in the church – fluctuations, disturbances, imbalances – are the primary sources of creativity. It's all in what we expect.

And what about those disciples? We can't imagine that they had any idea about what they were getting into when they said “yes” to following Jesus. They were truly ordinary men, who had no thought of giving up their day jobs and taking on the task of discipleship. And yet Jesus found ways to use them – to use their strengths, their weaknesses, their eccentricities, their frustrations, and then he sent them out to transform the world. One writer has said, “The Gospels make wonderfully clear that the disciples had not the foggiest idea of what they had gotten into when they followed Jesus. With a simple ‘follow me,’ Jesus invited ordinary people to come out and be part of an adventure, a journey that kept surprising them at every turn in the road.”

I've said this before – our job as the church is to grow disciples. That means opening ourselves to the possibility that the transforming power of the living God can work through us. We have to open ourselves to the possibility of surprise at every turn in the road. Again, our failure at disciple-making often comes when we put our limits on God's expectations. Jesus didn't give his disciples simple, safe tasks when he commissioned them into ministry. One writer has said, “His raw recruits, still smelling of fish and suspicion, were called to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. How would we like to be handed that list of ‘things to do’ by our pastor? How many of us would volunteer for discipleship if we realized those were the expectations.”

Well, that is what God expects the church to be about. It's about healing, teaching, and proclaiming the good news. “The church is to be about movement, not static, stay-at-home, preserve-our-level-of-comfort-and-let-them-come-to-us spirituality, but a bold ‘going out’ into the world that God loves.” One commentary reminds us that, “It's tempting for us in the church to see its ‘reason for being’ in meeting the needs of those (of us) who ‘pay their way,’

perhaps like members of a private club. And yet the gospel impels us to interact with the world beyond our walls, right in our own neighborhood, or in places far away, places which our compassion can reach even though we may never physically go there ourselves.”³

I think about the young people that we will commission a little later, as they begin their mission trip, as they go out to be the church in the world, to be the church on the move. What a wonderful and extraordinary experience for them – and for us.

Next Sunday, we’re going to sit down and talk about what it means to be the church, what it means to be Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. We’re going to talk about what it took to get us to this point in our ministry, and we’re going to talk about whether or not we’re ready for whatever surprises God has in store for us.

Yesterday morning, your session met in retreat to discuss the presentation of the findings of the congregational survey and plan other activities for the congregational event on Sunday. It was an interesting morning, and you know that when Minnesotans say something is “interesting,” it usually means that we don’t quite know what to think about it.

There are some interesting findings in the survey about what this congregation – at least those who completed the survey – wants in pastoral leadership, that will probably make for some lively conversation next week. And I think there will also be plenty to think about and talk about in mission, worship and music, education, and congregational identity. It’s also our chance to think about what we will leave behind as we turn the next corner. I hope you plan to be with us.

This story from Genesis isn’t just about surprises and life-changing experiences. It’s also about promise. A promise fulfilled in the birth of a child who brought laughter, the promise of a great nation. And it’s about faithfulness. Remember that just as the visitors were preparing to leave, God said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” It’s about the promise to us as well. God makes the promised future possible, but we have to open our hearts to promise and possibility and transformation.

I hope that we would be like Abraham and Sarah, welcoming the unexpected; that we would be like the disciples, trusting the call. One of the most intriguing things about both of these stories is that nobody said “no.” They opened themselves to possibility, and look what happened.

So, “God give us rain when we expect sun.
 Give us music when we expect trouble.
 Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
 Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
 Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
 God, play with us, turn us sideways and around.
 Amen.”

³ Online reflection on the weekly theme: Named for Purpose