

Expecting the Unexpected

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Surprise! Who likes surprises? All the time? Years ago I had a yellow Labrador Retriever that I named Georgia. They are a breed that loves the water. When she was a puppy, I took her out to a nearby lake while living in Texas, and she began to frolic near the shore. So I found a stick and started throwing it out into the water. Sure enough, Georgia eagerly ran after the stick, splashing joyously through the water, and then proudly bringing the stick back to me – so I could throw it again! Now this lake became deeper at a very shallow angle, until it was about twenty yards out. There the bottom fell away steeply. Georgia was having a grand old time as I threw the stick further and further out. I'm sure you've guessed what happened – the pup excitedly bounding through the water, and suddenly disappearing completely under the surface. After a few moments she came up spluttering, and dog-paddled back to me. I threw another stick – and this dog stayed right next to me! She avoided big bodies of water for the rest of her life. Obviously, this was not a good surprise for Georgia.

Surprises are things we don't expect. There is a true story of a Secret Service agent who was celebrating his fiftieth birthday. This individual was not currently on a presidential security detail but had served on one before. Some of his family and friends got together for a surprise party for when he got home from work, and someone thought it would be fun to have everyone set off "party poppers" as they were yelling, "Surprise!" (the ones where you pull the string and confetti blows out the other end). His wife was asked if that was a good idea, and she said his hands would be full of his briefcase and laptop, and that it wouldn't be a problem... yeah, right. He opens the door, the poppers explode... he drops everything and draws his weapon amazingly fast. He quickly disengaged, but he was so keyed up from the adrenaline, he had a hard time enjoying the party. But at least he didn't shoot anyone on his birthday.

You see, this gentleman was prepared for surprises – just not for the specific one he experienced. We too need to understand how to respond when God gives us the unexpected. In other words, how do we live expecting God to do the unusual, the thing we never thought of? Both of the scripture passages we heard this morning have to do with surprises happening. Moses was literally minding his

own business, going about his daily job, when he sees a sight that mystifies him. A thorny bush appears to be burning yet is not consumed. So he went to take a look. And that was all God needed. He called out to Moses, and identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses hid his face out of fear – not surprising. God then charges Moses with the mission of returning to Egypt and bringing the people of Israel out of bondage, confronting Pharaoh as he does so. Now this was an even bigger surprise than the burning bush itself! Moses clearly did not think himself capable of such a monumental task. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” he asks. And there is a third surprise – God names Himself as Yahweh, which can be translated many different ways – “I am who I am,” “I am what I am,” or even “I will be what I will be!” An enigmatic and deep name, indeed.

Or let’s look at our gospel passage from Matthew. Jesus is causing surprise and consternation among His disciples, by speaking of His upcoming suffering, death and resurrection. This was definitely outside of any experience the disciples could have understood. Peter, the one with a frequent case of foot in mouth disease, actually scolds Jesus for this. “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” That frankly took a little nerve, I think! And here comes the second surprise: Jesus names Peter as Satan, and a hindrance. The word Jesus used is translated into Greek as the word *skandalon*. It literally speaks of the trigger of a trap. It means a bent sapling. Think of an old snare where a young tree has been bent waiting for an unsuspecting animal to release it, entrapping the little beast. Some translations call this a “stumbling block.” You can see how similar the Greek word is to our English word “scandal.” So this was a big unwelcome surprise for Peter. This event actually happened right after Peter had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, and where Jesus blessed him and renamed him.

And then there’s a third surprise for us in Matthew. In order to save one’s life or soul, you need to lose it. If you keep your life, trying to preserve it, you end up losing your life. All of these things are very unexpected, first for Moses by that bush, and then for Peter and the disciples on the road to Jerusalem. Look at what is common here. People are outside of their comfort zone – they are experiencing something that is not safe, secure, or expected. Their ideas of what is right get turned upside down! There is a famous passage in Isaiah that says,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” If we learn of God’s thoughts and ways, they can be confusing or strange to us. Not surprisingly, people often will feel very inadequate when faced with one of God’s surprises.

God’s surprises will often go against what we think makes sense. We may be accustomed to our faith life going forward in a certain way – church on Sunday, give to missions, bake something for the sale, contribute to the food bank, make repairs around the church building. Don’t get me wrong – all of these are wonderful things to do! Sunday morning services are predictable, with hymns and praise songs we love, prayers in the right places, when to stand, when to sit. So when God gives us an experience outside of this, we might even wonder if it is God – or just stay with what is expected and comfortable. Businesspeople often speak of thinking “outside of the box” – in other words, coming up with novel or new ideas. We often have God inside our own boxes, and He is way too big to be contained that way!

Most of us like to be “common sense” type of people, and yes, that often serves us well. We need to remember that God has a perspective way beyond that which we have. So when God challenges us with something that seems foolish or unwise, we often reject what God has to say because it makes no sense to us!

We very badly need to be able to expect the unexpected from God. It could be pleasant and wonderful, so that we must take off our shoes in such a holy presence as Moses did. It could be hard to swallow as well. What if Jesus named you Satan?! That must not have been comfortable for Peter.

So how do we do this? What must we do to be expectant of God’s ways, even when they go against every assumption or habit we may have? God gives us many clues and ways to identify that something is from Him. Paul tells us to conform our thinking to God’s – our minds to that of Christ. The more we do this, the more likely we will recognize divine fingerprints on what is happening around us. Be sure, however: Just because something is weird doesn’t mean it is from God!

Another way we recognize God’s surprises is by the witness of the Holy Spirit within us. What do I mean by that? By faith we know that God is resident within

our spirits. He is constantly speaking to us. If you have ever had the feeling that something is right even if it looks strange – (or the opposite: it looks right but feels wrong!) – it may be time to trust that God is indicating something to you!

When I was in fifth or sixth grade, there was a hill near our home that was perfect for jumping off of on a Sting Ray bicycle. I could get up a head of steam and catch some wonderful air! It felt like it was six feet high to me, although it was probably much less. I knew that this was probably not the wisest thing to do, but it felt so great! There of course came the time when I crashed down as usual on the pavement below, still upright. But this time the bike stopped and the handlebars kept moving! The yoke of the bicycle sheared right off. I was fortunate not to put a hole in my forehead!

Things can feel good and be wrong. We trust the Spirit within us to help tell the difference.

Another way to discern if the unexpected is good is to see what it accomplishes. A surprise from God is going to have a good outcome. Like the Israelites in Egypt, the surprise of Moses leading them out sets God's people free. Or like the one who gives up his or her own life to Christ, there is the gain of real life – real life with Jesus. It forwards the will of God, and we know without a doubt that His will is wonderful. Just to remind you of things I've said before from the pulpit – God does NOT visit evil on people to “teach them a lesson,” or for some other purpose. No, God did not give someone cancer so that they could learn to be closer to God. It's true that someone could learn this, but God does not bring evil into our lives. Have you ever heard that God “wanted so-and-so as His own special little angel in Heaven, more than you desired here on earth.” God will always be compassionate, loving, and beautiful in His dealings with humanity.

A surprise or unexpected event that is from God will always bring new and richer life to us. Why – because that is God's intent with us – to enlighten, lift up, and delight His children.

Life is full of many unexpected turns, right? So let's begin to figure out when it is from God and respond appropriately. We live lives of expectancy – that God IS going to act for good in each of us. Our daily challenge is to bring the delightfully unexpected that God brings to each of us into our normal day-to-day experience.

We could talk about many other examples in the Bible: Jonah was surprised when he preached to the people of Ninevah and – they repented! Ruth and her mother-in-law were gleaning in a field just to have enough to eat. Little did she know that she was going to bag the owner as her husband! Peter was set free from prison by an angel. This was so surprising to those at the church that they thought he was a ghost! They had been praying for his release, and it happened! Surprise!

God is a God of wonderful surprises, then and now. So let's live in expectation that He will do these wonderful things right here in the midst of our lives. Look for how He will be blessing you and those around you. Just be prepared to smile and shout with the Lord: "Surprise!"