

The Ultimate Surprise Party

Part 7 of Sermon Series:

Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 2:1-21

and delivered on

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Pentecost Sunday (Year C)

at

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For the past several weeks, we've had this sermon theme "Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God;" paying particular attention to Scripture from the book of Acts. To be honest, I don't know how *surprising* or *unexpected* God's activity in each passage was/is. Surprise depends on the unanticipated, and it feels sort of strange to not expect God to show up. At the same time, however, it is true. Isn't it?

When we read Scripture in our personal devotion or when we hear it read in worship, we expect God to show up somehow in the story or passage. But how often do we really expect God to show up in our lives? not just in some ephemeral way; but in real power? Are we or should we be surprised?

I personally, like the idea of surprise. I like it because it reminds us that the intensity of life, of joy, of love is always ready to spring into the moment. And yet, for surprise to work, it has to be unexpected.

The sermon title today is "The Ultimate Surprise Party," but I've never been to a surprise party. I've seen them on tv or in movies, but a real surprise party... nope. I thought about throwing a surprise party for Susan's birthday this year. Besides the logic of how to get people into the house and to hide cars in January, there's the elephant in the room. She has a birthday every year. And it's always on the same day. How is that a surprise? Except that for that celebration, the surprise was who showed up.

That's the surprise that happened on Pentecost. Pentecost was one of the three great pilgrimage feasts for Israel. We find reference to it in Exodus 34:22, Number 28:17, Deuteronomy 16:10 and 2 Chronicles 8:13, where it is called the Feast of Weeks. The name Pentecost derived from the fact that it occurred fifty days after the barley sheaf offering during the Passover.¹ We as Christians keep that name because we celebrate it fifty days after Easter. The Passover that the disciples gathered together to celebrate in this passage from Acts was a celebration of the Law that was given at Mount Sinai.² This is the context in which the disciples gathered.

Jews from around the world had travelled to Jerusalem for the festival. This wasn't a celebration that you just did at the local synagogue or in your hometown. It was a pilgrimage celebration. This wasn't just something you did, because you were supposed to, but something that was important. The people who had come to Jerusalem loved God. They must have. They made the effort to be there that week. They made the effort to be away from their farms or business. They made the effort to travel, some of them for weeks or longer. They gathered to celebrate the Law – the instructions – that God had given them. For many this may have been a once in a lifetime trip, but they did it. What were they expecting? Essentially it had become a harvest festival.³ I guess in that context we could compare it to Thanksgiving Day, a day nominally devoted to thanking God, but really about gorging on turkey and watching a football game. Do any of us really expect that when we gather for Thanksgiving dinner that God will show up and say, "You're welcome"?

When the disciples gathered for that Pentecost celebration, I think they were hopeful and enjoyed seeing all of the people who'd come from so many places to thank God for the blessings of the Law. Remember, they were still conflicted about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. They didn't think of themselves as anything but Jewish. They were just Jews who knew that the Messiah had come, and that his name was Jesus. Granted, there is more to it than that, but you get the point. Right? Moreover, it had been ten days since they saw Jesus ascend into heaven, the last time that they would experience Christ's physical presence in their midst.

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids Mich.: Zondervan, 1976) 692.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Now Jesus had promised many times to send the Holy Spirit to them. We hear it in the Gospel reading for today, in which Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for his impending crucifixion and says, “I have said these things while I am still with you, But the Advocate {the Paraclete}, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said.” (Jn 14:25-26) When he met the disciples on the first evening of Resurrection as they huddled in a locked room, Jesus appeared and “he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 20:22) They had the promise, they’d been told it would come. They just didn’t know when. So in the midst of this annual celebration, a surprise party breaks out! The surprise isn’t that there was a celebration, but who showed up but gift that guest brought.

I’m reminded of the video clips that we so often see on the news or passed around via social media, in which a parent surprises his child at some school celebration, still wearing his service uniform. I’m reminded of the grown children who pop home to unexpecting parents. It’s not that they never expected a visit... Just not, now. Just not at this moment.

The Holy Spirit - God – appears. Visually they see these little flames that settle on each one of them. Then it happens, they go out into the streets and start proclaiming that God has come among them – not just the disciples but everyone. The miracle of the moment, is that everyone who hears understands the words they say, even though they all speak different languages.

But the real gift isn’t in that moment, it’s in the power that the Holy Spirit imparts on them to be effective even when they aren’t up to the task. Think about it. None of the disciples went out speaking Cretan or Egyptian or Persian. They went out speaking Aramaic or Hebrew (a language most of the crowd may have known a little), but the crowds heard them in Cretan, Arabic, Persian and Egyptian. Even though they weren’t competent to preach in those languages, the Holy Spirit made them effective.

This power of the Holy Spirit isn’t new. Abraham and Sarah weren’t physically capable of producing a child. But Isaac was born in their old age. Rachel and Hannah yearned for children, but were infertile... until the Holy Spirit came. Then there’s Mary whose body may have been able to welcome life, but whose behavior was a particular impediment. What do we hear, when she points that out, but that, “The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.’” (Lk 1:35) The Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah in the temple. (Lk 1:15)

It was the Holy Spirit that allowed Joseph and Daniel to interpret dreams. Do we really think that Jonah’s preaching in Ninevah was so spectacular that his oratory convinced the people to repent? Think about it. He didn’t want to go in the first place, and then after he finally did, he griped that God showed mercy on them when they repented. I sort of imagine that he was just going through the motions like a kid telling his sister that he’s sorry, because mom told him to, “Yeah, yeah you will be destroyed because you are sinners, give up hope and come to terms with it.” But the people did repent. That wasn’t because Jonah was so effective.

How many stories are there in the Gospels when Jesus meets people in the midst of the ordinary. He shows up on the shore where Peter has been fishing all night to no avail (just going about his usual business) and tells him to drop his nets once more.. Then it happens! Surprise!... The nets are so full that they fill two boats. (Lk 5:3-7)

That same God is ready to meet you in the ordinary, when you least expect it, even though we should. You probably won’t speak so that others understand you no matter their native tongue. But who knows? Paul tells us that there are a variety of gifts (of manifestations) of the Holy Spirit for Christians: healing, exhortation, encouraging, generosity, the utterance of knowledge, all given for the common good. (2 Cor 12:4-9) Let us not be confused, these are not talents or skills that God bestows on us, but manifestations of the Holy Spirit working through us despite

ourselves or our own incompetence to bring about God's purpose. That's the surprise. God doesn't need you to be perfect to do wonders through you. You can even screw up, and a miracle may happen.

I read an article earlier this week about a mother who tried to surprise her daughter at college by showing up a day earlier than planned. When she got to the dorm room, the daughter wasn't there. So the mother decided to lay on her daughter's bed and take a selfie. Here's the text conversation that transpired.

Mom – Look where I am.

Where are you?

Daughter – Where's that??

I'm in my dorm

Please tell me your not in someone else's dorm

Mom – I am in the wrong dorm omg.

Here's the thing. The mother set out to surprise her daughter. She did. It may not have been as intended, but it conveyed the love. Because of her screw up, that story got spread around and brought joy to so many others.⁴

God has a surprise in store for you. No. Check that, God has lots of surprises in store for you. And the surprises all center on the fact that when we love him and when we gather together, that the Holy Spirit will show up and do wonders through us, even when it might seem that we've messed it up. That makes for the ultimate surprise. AMEN.

⁴ <https://www.today.com/parents/mom-surprises-daughter-college-takes-selfie-wrong-dorm-bed-t91856>