

SURPRISE! It's God!

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Wedgewood Baptist Church

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Genesis 21:1-7; Acts 9:1-19-22

As you listen to these stories of Sarah and Saul, what do you hear that strikes you as outrageous?

My paternal Grandmother will be 93 next month. What if God told her she would bear another son? Laughter might be an appropriate response.

What if God told you to go to the hills of Afghanistan to provide Christian guidance to the fiercest leader of Al Qaida? Questioning God might be justified.

These stories are examples in real people's lives that God is faithful and will surprise anyone with forgiveness, hope, and the responsibility of love.

Indeed, God works in mysterious ways.

The Christian life is full of surprises. In fact, the message of the Bible is often the opposite of what is expected. Jesus challenged the know-it-alls of his time. Paradox seems to be at the base of much of what is taught: The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The one who seeks to glorify himself shall be humbled and vice versa. Often a curse and a blessing are two sides of the same thing. How do we discern what is God's message to us? How do we stay confident in our faith and at the same time struggle through Life's devastating challenges? How do we trust in God's faithfulness and proclaim the message of hope and love? How do we recognize the surprise of grace in the chaos of our intentions and expectations?

God is not always revealed in the form of a person or a blinding bright light.

As a Hospice chaplain I meet people daily who are struggling with the issue of God's faithfulness at the end of life. Many have been taught that living a good life will bring them paradise in the end. Often people feel cheated and abandoned by God when they are facing dying from an overwhelming illness in which hope seems elusive. Others heap guilt upon themselves because they assume they must not have lived a good enough life to deserve peace at death. Some people have no particular belief and are angry at what's been thrown at them. Still, others are at peace, having confidence in God's love and purpose.

Most often, the people I visit who have discovered grace seem to have received it through a sense of sacred presence: through traditions, rituals, scripture, prayer, being present with family, being heard or understood, being loved, accepted, belonging.

Grace appears in contrast to many of our worldly ideals of being the best, the smartest, the fastest, the richest, the most correct, the most efficient, the most attractive, the most productive, and the most powerful. We are all influenced by social expectations. How do we take a step back? How do we take a deep enough breath to free ourselves to make healthy and loving choices? How do we listen to God? How, Where, When do we hear God? How do we find that place near to the heart of God?

[Lucky for you I have all the answers... Of course not!]

Two images that help me to gain perspective in my own life are the images of the Garden and the Journey. Most of my life has been on a Journey. As a missionary kid I traveled a lot with my family back forth from Hong Kong to the States. During my early adult years, I didn't know how to stay put. I moved every 2-3 years. When I moved to Greenville, SC in the 80's I stayed for 8 years – the longest I have ever lived anywhere. I still moved within town to different apartments and homes. When I married and moved to Charlotte almost six years ago, I was shocked at how difficult it was for me to make the transition. I used to be an expert at moving, adjusting

and starting all over. It was time, this time, for me to plant, to tend a garden rather than to travel on another journey. The Garden and the Journey help me to validate different experiences in my life and to recognize the grace moments.

The Journey is often exciting as you encounter new experiences and people and places.

Traveling suggests independence and growth through movement forward in a certain direction with a goal or destination and interaction with people. The Journey requires a lot of preparation, energy, and decision making. As you leave each place you grieve the losses of what is familiar and comfortable until you find new interesting places. The Journey acknowledges what is temporary, and values immediacy – the meaning in each present moment.

The Garden suggests a gentle solitude with subtle changes that are often based on other forces such as the rain, pruning, fertilizing, and sunshine. Losses occur but the Garden stays familiar and quite comfortable. Tending the Garden requires some preparation, energy, and regular attention. The Garden offers permanence and putting down roots. Growth is interdependent upon outward forces as well as one's attention to the needs of the garden. The Garden values patience and waiting as the past and present offer hope in the future.

These images emerged this week in two of my visits:

As we sat on the deck for our visit, a husband and wife were talking about life and death. The wife asked her husband to give her a sign after his death that he would still be with her in some way. He looked over his shoulder from his wheelchair, indicating the beautiful plants and flowers behind him and told her he would always be with her in their garden. He smiled and said

he would help to bring the rain and the sun as needed. They chuckled at ‘his’ power to produce rain given the current drought. She was comforted.

I was invited into the bedroom of an elderly and bed-bound woman who was very anxious and seemed inconsolable. She closed her eyes and chanted, “God, please take me. Let me go on.” As she and I talked, she acknowledged that she was ready for God to come and take her on the journey to heaven where there would be music and sweet prayers. She felt that her family would be okay and she didn’t want to wait any longer. She was ready to travel. She smiled and calmed and slept a bit after we talked and read some Psalms and prayed. Her caregivers seemed comforted to be able to affirm her desire and readiness to journey with God.

Sometimes God comes to us in the Garden and surprises us with outrageous news – like the promise to Sarah and Abraham of a son. Sometimes God’s word comes quietly in the still small voice or the hush of the breeze. The Garden teaches us to wait, to anticipate the promise of new life each spring.

Sometimes God stops us on our Journey and points us in another direction. Sometimes God’s surprises come as we encounter what’s new up ahead. Sometimes we can look back at the path we have chosen and see right and wrong paths. Sometimes affirmation comes in hindsight.

Sometimes God needs us to serve in outstanding ways. Much of the time God’s love is revealed through us when we think we are doing nothing special. It is often in the small and simple ways we share God’s love that are the most powerful.

One of the greatest ‘Aha’s in my life was when I realized that in order to be obedient to God, I had to be willing to be ordained to the Gospel ministry. My resistance to being set apart by ordination was blocking opportunities of service that God intended for me. Sixteen years later I am learning that the most powerful and creative authority of ordained ministry is the willingness to be intentionally present, to be still, to listen openly, to love, to hope, and to trust in God’s presence and power and love with God’s children not above or separate from them.

In Saul’s story, God took the worst kind of hateful, exclusive, black and white thinker and stopped him dead in his tracks. God forgave him and allowed him to become a powerful instrument of love and hope. The change in Saul’s life also impacted Ananias’ life. Stunned by God’s outrageous command to help the one who had destroyed so many Christians, Ananias had to be open to trust God’s wisdom.

It was absurd for God to choose Sarah, for God to choose Paul, for God to choose any of us. The truth that sets us free is that God loves and chooses all of us. God forgives All. Surprise! It is God!

We know that God is in this place of worship because this is a place of graceful surprises. We are tiny and yet we manage to minister in many different ways to many people.

Some of us are like Saul. God used drastic measures to turn us in a different direction toward hope and the responsibilities of love.

Some of us are like Sarah. We are busy and eagerly working to make God's surprise a reality. We sometimes get in the way when we could be resting and waiting patiently upon God's strange timing.

Some of us are like Ananias. We are very familiar with trusting and serving God and yet, we are challenged when called upon to minister to those who sought to hurt us or whose beliefs and practices offend us. In today's world conflict, this particular calling may increase.

How do we recognize the surprise of grace in the chaos of our intentions and expectations?

Spend time in your Garden. Take time on your Journey. Be still and know that God is God. In the nothingness is the Creator's fullness. The intake of each breath is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Listening with a pure heart creates the space for love and hope and peace.

As you get dirty and dig in your garden; as you load your pack and travel your path, Listen and Watch for God's surprises. Such gifts are outrageously hopeful and life giving. Be confident in your faith and receive the grace that is offered each day. Know that God loves you and is with you always.

Part of the surprise is that God really is with us in those moments. We are not alone. We are not the source of creative energy, love or hope. God is. When we are still, when we are open, when we release our own agenda – God Is ... and ... We Are. Surprise!

Amen.