



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JULY 30, 2017
THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Kingdom of God Is . . . Surprise! Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Every time I read this story and get to the moment when Jacob lifts the flap on the honeymoon tent and sees his bride for the first time in the light of dawn, I hear Gomer Pyle exclaim in his excited Southern drawl: “Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!” I figure it must have been a dark and stormy night in Haran when Jacob and his bride retired for the night since he did not realize that he had married Leah instead of Rachel until the next morning! Surprise it was! Jacob the Trickster had been outfoxed by his Uncle Laban.

There is an interesting interplay of trickery and respect for tradition going on in this story and both Jacob and Laban play their parts well for, in the end, Jacob gets the best of his uncle when he sneaks off in the middle of the night with both of Laban’s daughters, his grandchildren, and all of the livestock and servants Jacob has accumulated over the years. When he finally leaves his uncle behind with an oath that God will keep an eye on each of them, Jacob gets the last laugh. Sadly, the people who have no say in what is going on are Leah and Rachel who are treated by their father like commodities to be traded. How tragic that such logic ever determined personal relationships.

Remember that this journey to Haran in search of a wife began with Jacob running away from home after stealing his brother’s birthright and deceiving his father. On his first night on the run, Jacob dreamed of a ladder extending to heaven, a sure sign of God’s blessing on the scoundrel.

When I read this story, I wonder, however, if God working through Laban? Is the deception Jacob’s punishment for his sins? Are all of the shenanigans part of God’s plan for the birth of new nation of people? Or does God have to always be one step ahead of the rest of us in order to accomplish what he wants through us?

One thing that is consistent throughout the biblical story is that God often surprises us with what and how things happen. I don’t think for a moment that God wanted Jacob to treat his father and brother the way he did nor do I think God was pleased with Laban’s deception. I do notice, however,

that just when you think God's people are down and out for the last count—surprise! God does something astonishing and the story continues.

Is that not what happened when Abraham turned a hundred and his blushing bride Sarah was a scant ninety years old? Isaac was born—the child of laughter! It happened when Jacob thought his beloved son Joseph had been killed by a wild animal and famine hit the land of Canaan. Desperate and humiliated, Jacob's ten older sons traveled to Egypt to ask for help with food and . . . surprise! The man who was in charge of stockpiling and distributing food during the famine was none other than their little brother Joseph. It happened again, hundreds of years after Joseph died and was forgotten, when the Hebrew people became slaves of Pharaoh. Their spirits were diminished. The hope was dim. It seemed as if God no longer heard their prayers. Then . . . surprise! A Hebrew baby was saved from death and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. He fled the country as a young man and became a shepherd for his father-in-law. One day he encountered God in a bush that burned but was not consumed. On that holy ground, Moses was called to deliver his people from bondage and lead them to the Promised Land.

Generations later, after kings and nation building, after conquest and defeat, after a divided nation and prophetic warnings, exile and return, occupation and oppression by a foreign army, the Hebrews were again a broken and dispirited people. Then, in the bleak midwinter . . . surprise! The Messiah arrived—as a baby, no less—and hope returned as he taught and modeled the kingdom of God among them. Then a dark shadow was cast over them once more when, after a mock trial and brutal crucifixion, Jesus died and was buried, and their hopes with him. But, three days later . . . surprise! Jesus rose from death to declare life! Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!

Jesus tried over and over to get people to pay attention to their own story, to look at what God had done through their ancestors, and to examine their own lives to discover how God had been at work in them. He urged them over and over to expect the unexpected with God, to pay attention to what was obscure. He begged them to listen to what was silent and to see what was hidden. Jesus invited them to believe what was beyond belief and to trust in what was most unlikely.

Jesus taught and showed them that the kingdom of God is surprise! It pops up in places you would think unlikely, at times that are unexpected, and in ways that are absolutely absurd. When God is around defeats lead to

victories, failures become successes, sins lead to salvation, and death becomes a path to life. There is never a dead end for people who place their trust in God.

A few weeks ago, my son Robert sent me an article which traced the path Clemson had taken over the past few decades in order to make it to the NCAA football championship and win this past January. As much as I pull for the Tigers, I don't really think God cares too much one way or the other which team goes home with the trophy. It was the author's perspective on what happened along the way, however, that caught my attention.

Ryan Kantor chronicles how a chain of events including missed passes, wayward kicks, ugly losses, surprising wins, coaching changes, recruitment opportunities, player transfers, injuries, extra efforts, and team spirit combined to place Clemson in its second championship contest with Alabama and skip away with a win.¹ His point in the article is that along the way, there were a number of factors, some of them bleak and dismal at the time, which opened a door to opportunities that would not have existed otherwise. In secular parlance, the wisdom is: when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. In the language of faith, it is: the kingdom of God is surprise!

In an Upper Room devotion last week, I read these moving words:

I could smell the paint drying on my latest work as I knelt to pray, "Thank you, God, for inspiring me to do this piece. Now whom do you want me to give it to?" God brought my sister to mind, but I said, "Lord, she's an atheist." My sister would roll her eyes anytime someone spoke about religion. However, I obeyed God's nudging, even enclosing a note explaining that God had told me to send the painting to her. Weeks later I received her response: "I was praying to God for a sign. Then I got this piece from you not even an hour later. When I read that God told you it was for me, I cried. I have opened my heart to God."

My sister may think I was the answer to her prayer, but really she was the answer to mine. God helped our prayers to intersect at a critical juncture that changed both our lives for the better.

¹Ryan Kantor, "Moments: How Clemson Came to be Crowned National Champions," *Shakin the Southland* (July 5, 2017); available online at: shakinthesouthland.com.

[Then the author adds:]

Being in prison on death row, I often question how and why God would possibly use me. I struggle with feelings of worthlessness despite being a sincere, repentant believer and despite the Bible's saying God has a plan for each of us. My sister's letter affirmed to me that God can work through every member of the body of Christ, including me and my sister.²

Surprise! Just because you are on death row does not mean your life is over. Surprise! Just because you are on death row does not mean that God does not need you to bear witness to his work in the world. Surprise! The circumstances of our lives, no matter how bleak and despairing they might seem, do not have to define us forever. Surprise! The circumstances in which we find ourselves—of our own or another's doing—do not limit God's ability to use us in some way to reach out to other people. Surprise! God wants and needs and loves us! God invites us to be surprised.

Life is never over for those of us who have faith in God. We often look for the big, bold acts of God that we expect to shake the earth and light up the sky. When they don't happen, we are disappointed and wonder where in the world God is and if God even cares. If, however, we look small, look near, and look within we will discover the amazing ways God is transforming life all around us.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of the seeds, which grows into a tree fit to provide lodging for the birds. He said the kingdom of God is like leaven which is added to flour to make bread rise and be delicious. In both cases, tiny things cause bigger things to happen, but we have to wait. God's way among us is organic. It is not flash in the pan. We cannot rush the Spirit of God.

Jesus also said that the kingdom of God is like a treasure which someone found in field who then went and bought the field so that he could have the treasure. He said that the kingdom of God is like a pearl which a seasoned collector found and then sold everything he had in order to possess that one, special pearl. The kingdom of God is something we want,

²George T. Wilkerson, "Answer to Prayer," Copyright©2017 by The Upper Room, a ministry of GBOD. All rights reserved.

something we must have, a way of life that finally connects with who we are and what we are about in the world.

Obviously Jacob was surprised and dismayed when he discovered that his new bride was Leah instead of Rachel, but through Leah eight sons were born who fathered eight of the tribes of Israel. Leah and Rachel were a vital part of fulfilling God's promise of creating a nation that would share the good news of his love with the world.

There are days which bring surprises—not all of them good. The phone rings, an email arrives, a friend comes by to chat, the boss invites you to her office, the mail comes, the other shoe drops, life as you know it changes immediately. But, surprise! The circumstances of life do not limit God. The things we do and the things that simply happen to us do not hamper God's desire for our lives to have meaning and purpose. Often, God uses what initially is bad to lead to something good like death row inmate learning to paint and being for his sister a sign of God's love for her. Do you remember what Joseph said to his brothers after their father Jacob died and they feared his retaliation for what they had done to him? He said, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:19-20). God can use even the evil that we do in life to bring about something good. Surprise!

Jesus spent a lot of time trying to help people understand that God is not an abstract idea that floats around the universe. Neither is God an absent landlord who demands payment for the privilege of living on earth. Jesus demonstrated that God is living and tangible, as close as the air we breath, as present as a lover's touch, as strong as a mother's love, as vigilant as a father's care. Jesus taught us that in order to take our place in the community of God, we have to become like children: inquisitive, open, trusting, observant. In order to fulfill our calling in the kingdom of God, we have to look beyond what we have done or what has happened to us to discover what God is doing in the world. If we are to enjoy the gift of God's presence in the world, we have to be willing to be surprised . . . and we will be! Amen.

July 30, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Sometimes we seem to have circumstances under control and convince ourselves we have life figured out, O God, when something happens to shatter our assumptions or shake the foundations upon which we have constructed our lives: an illness or injury, the unforeseen opportunity to realize a long-held dream, a devastating disappointment, a new relationship which broadens our perspective, or a tug to go in an unfamiliar direction. Life can both delight and terrify us with its possibility and unpredictability.

Through all of the doubts, questions, and changes of course, you, O God, remain a constant source of strength and comfort. Just when we feel most uncertain or frightened, glimpses of your kingdom often appear in unexpected places to offer direction and hope. You have not promised that our faith in you will prevent us from experiencing sorrow or pain, but you have promised that you will walk with us through every season of life, provide light to guide our steps, and offer grace to calm our restless spirits. When the path is unclear, our souls are weary, the choices are perplexing, or the outcomes discouraging, be our vision, our defender, our place of respite, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

We also acknowledge, Generous God, that, though we have struggles and fears, we are a people who have known privilege and comforts and opportunities far beyond our deserving. Out of the great gifts we have received, teach us to be a blessing to others. Help us to bring healing and wholeness where there is suffering, to speak peace in the midst of violence, to be present with those who know sorrow and loneliness, to stand with courage for those who are vulnerable. Place us in the path of those with whom we can share the gifts of mercy you have so generously given to us. Grant, O Lord, in our abundance and in our need; in times of peace and in times of turmoil; in all that this marvelous, beautiful, surprising, and mysterious life holds, an extra measure of your grace for today and hope for all our days to come. In the name of the One who came to share life with us, and who showed us how to live and how to love, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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