

## The Element of Surprise

I asked Fox to share that joke with you this morning because it illustrates something about the connection between surprise and humor. It follows a classic pattern for jokes: it sets you up with something that happens repeatedly ("Got any duck food?") and then it changes the pattern in a funny way. Now, I have it on good authority that surprise is part of the essence of humor. My authority here is, of course, Ron McCutchan, whose theatre review in last Tuesday's BCR included the following theory of humor: "We laugh at incongruity, when something is obviously and extravagantly out of place." My contention is that the element of surprise is not only part of nature of humor; it is also part of the nature of God.

As I was working on today's sermon, I thought about different ways I might introduce an element of surprise into the service. I thought, at first, that I might decide to *not* follow the lectionary. If I had used a reading from the Koran, say, or from the Baghavad Gita, or from Walt Whitman's poetry, that would certainly have been a change, though I suppose that most of you know me too well to think of it as a complete surprise. But as it happens, today's appointed lectionary readings have plenty of surprise in them.

In the reading from Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three unexpected travelers. (Surprise!) They welcome the guests, washing their feet, feeding them, and waiting on them attentively. This extravagant hospitality was a high virtue in that culture, and Abraham clearly passes the test: he is a model of virtuous hospitality for the unexpected visitors. But then there are more surprises in store: first, the guests turn out to be divine beings -- either they're God or, depending on how you read it, they're messengers from God. (Surprise!) Then they tell Abraham that his wife, his post-menopausal wife, is going to have a son. (Surprise!) In the next part of the story, which we didn't read this morning, Sarah laughs when she hears this news -- showing again that surprise is both in the nature of God, and in the nature of humor.

Hospitality continues to be an important virtue in the New Testament. Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And the Gospel of Matthew makes an even stronger claim: that the stranger in need is more than just possibly a divine being: the stranger in need is always Jesus himself. Matthew 25:44-45 says: "Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" Clearly, hospitality is still thought of as very important. Yet in our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning, in the story of Mary and Martha, we have at least two new surprises. First: hospitality, it turns out, is *not* always the most important thing. There are some situations, as when Jesus is come to teach us himself, that we should stop fussing about the hors d'oeuvres, stop trying to be in control, stop rushing around looking for two sticks to rub together to make our own fire, and accept the surprising fire the Jesus brings. Second, another big surprise that we often take for granted in this passage: contrary to the expectations of the culture, women clearly have big parts to play in Jesus' movement. Martha seems to be the head of a household, a material supporter of Jesus' ministry. Mary is a student of Jesus, a disciple, learning at the feet of the master as was the custom for male disciples too. (Surprise!)

As you can see, the lectionary readings for today have plenty of material for a sermon about surprise. But that isn't really surprising, because there are lots of surprises in the Bible. For instance, I could have used last week's readings, when we heard Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. There's a big surprise right in those two words, or at least there was a big surprise in them when Jesus lived, and also when the Gospels were written, when the Jews commonly despised the Samaritans. Just putting the words "Good" and "Samaritan" together was a big surprise for the original audience--as if I now told you a story about the Good Islamic Fundamentalist or the Good Governor of Illinois. (Surprise!) All the parables of Jesus have some kind of surprise in them, or at least they had a surprise in them before we neutralized them with reverential repetition.

Or I could have used our reading from *two* weeks ago. That Sunday, we heard about Naaman, the general of the Arameans, who came to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. He was rich and famous and important -- not, himself, a king, but definitely a V.I.P. He expected a healing with some deference to his rank -- a healing with appropriate special effects. But the prophet Elisha doesn't even go out to speak with him. Instead he sends a message telling Naaman to go soak his head in the Jordan, seven times. So Naaman gets the healing, but not the deference or the special effects. God is not impressed by human rank and wealth. (Surprise!)

Or I could have used our reading from *three* weeks ago. We heard this story about Jesus, in Luke 9:59-60. "To another [Jesus] said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'" Did that strike you as a little shocking? Many commentators on this passage want to explain away the surprise. They suggest that maybe the man's father wasn't really dead -- maybe the man was just saying that as an excuse to get out of following Jesus. And then maybe Jesus knew that the man's father wasn't really dead -- so then maybe Jesus wasn't really saying that this son should miss his own father's funeral; he was just saying that the son should stop making lame excuses. But I'm not so sure. I think we're supposed to be shocked and surprised by this passage. The author of this gospel wants us to understand that things are getting very urgent at this point in the story -- and that part of the cost of being a follower of Jesus is that we can't always follow predictable rules. Respectful burial customs, like hospitality customs, are good and important, but God is too surprising to be contained in them.

So, yes, I could have used any lectionary reading from the last month to talk about surprise. In fact, I could have just opened

the Bible to almost any page. Surprise is the one constant in the Bible. That's why I can't agree with those who want to see the Bible as an infallible book of answers. The Bible contains the voices of many of our religious ancestors, people who had many different experiences of the presence of God. Those voices don't always agree with each other, but if there's one thing they do agree on, it's this: *if you think you understand God, you're in for a big surprise.*

Here's one more example -- I can't resist this, even though it's July -- it's from Luke, chapter 2.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. *[Surprise! Still, they think they understand God: a visitation like this must mean that God is angry with them. But they're in for another surprise.]* And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. *[Surprise! Still, they think they understand God: a savior, a christ, must mean a powerful king, a leader of armies, who will kick out the Roman oppressors. But they're in for still another surprise.]* And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. *[Surprise!]* And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:8-14, KJV)

It's hard to think of anything more compactly surprising than the Christmas story, unless it's the Easter story. Surprise is the one constant in the Bible.

And it isn't just in the Bible, but also in our lives in this community. I know several of you who have stories about the things God has done in your lives -- surprising things. Sometimes we're too embarrassed to share such stories, but I suspect that if we put all our stories together, we'd have our own collection of stories; and like the Bible, our collection of stories would have the surprising nature of God as a theme.

Now you might be wondering: if God's surprising nature is so clear -- if there's really a surprise on every page in the Bible, and if our own experiences of God are so generally surprising -- then why isn't it obvious to everyone? I'm afraid that part of the problem here is the church. Although God is surprising, church is not. Although it is in the nature of God to offer surprises, it is in the nature of church to suppress them. Now, please understand: I love this church, and I'm always proud to be able to serve it. Our church is good a many things. It is where we come together in fellowship, where we share and pray for each other's joys and trials; it is a focus for our work together to help each other, our community, and the wider world. Yet I know that all human institutions have their limitations, and this seems to be a common limitation of churches. They just aren't good at surprise.

Consider: church is where God comes at 10:30 sharp every Sunday morning -- like clockwork. Church is where we have a bulletin that tells what is going to happen (though it isn't much different from what happened last week), and where our goal is to have everything happen according to plan, smoothly and seamlessly, without any awkward pauses, with no surprises -- like clockwork. Church is where we repeat the liturgical seasons every year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time, and back to Advent again -- every year, our whole lives long, like clockwork. Church is where we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, so that we always know exactly what readings from the Bible will be used on a given Sunday -- next week, next month, a hundred years from now -- and we do it for good and rational reasons: the preacher doesn't have to hunt for a text to use, the musicians know what music to prepare, the Christian Ed team knows what lessons to prepare for the kids, the Worship team knows how to choose a theme for the decoration; everyone is on the same page, cooperating like clockwork. Church is where we have policies, and process, and a constitution, and a moderator, and Robert's Rules of Order, so that everything will run like clockwork. And I think that if an anthropologist from Mars landed here and visited our church, and judged what we believe about God by what we actually do here, that anthropologist would conclude that we believe, not in a God of surprises, but in a safe, predictable, tame God -- a God of clockwork.

The pioneering psychologist Karl Jung once said that religion is a defense against the religious experience. I think I'm saying something similar here: sometimes church is our defense against God, against the surprising nature of God. We take God's earth-shaking surprises and boil them down into doctrines, creeds, and catechisms, written down and organized just so. God startles us with something, but we act immediately to tame the surprise. It's like the Haydn symphony in G major that I played for you before worship this morning -- the so-called "Surprise Symphony". God's work in our lives is like this original:

[Play the surprise theme at the keyboard.]

But in church we change it somehow, just a little, so that we end up hearing it like this:

[Play it again, with a reedy organ stop, and with a resolution from a suspended fourth at the end instead of the surprise.]

So here's my challenge to you, Open Prairie: what can we do in church that will show that we believe in a surprising, mysterious, still-speaking God? What liturgy, what preaching, what artwork, what music, what kid's activities, what mission? I've contributed the Surprise Symphony this morning, and a sermon about surprise; Fox contributed a duck joke. But what else can we do? What can we do so that the Martian anthropologist will be able to tell, not just by what we say but by what we do, that we're joyfully expecting God's next surprise? I'm not saying that everything should be surprising, that church should be nothing but one surprise after another. I like tradition, and ritual, and comfort, and things usually running like clockwork. I like to read the King James version of the nativity story, as I just did, at Christmas, and I like to sing Christmas carols with the traditional words, even if they are archaic and a bit too gender-specific. God knows that we need some continuity in our lives, and I don't think God will hold that against us. But at the same time, it doesn't make sense to me that God's church should be completely safe and predictable and humorless, because I don't believe that any of those adjectives apply to God.

And I'll conclude today with a serious warning. If we don't make an intentional practice of welcoming God's surprises, both in church and out of it, we're likely to miss God altogether. We'll miss hearing something important because we're too busy fussing with the hors d'oeuvres. We might even reject God just because we don't like surprises. That, too, is a frequent lesson of Bible stories. Here it is in our lectionary reading from four weeks ago: Luke 8:35-37, after Jesus heals a man who was possessed by demons:

Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

Dear Spirit, we confess that we have not always been attentive to your surprises. We have sometimes been looking down when we should have been looking up, and we have sometimes been afraid and turned away. Give us another chance, please: come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

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July 18, 2010