

“Surprised by God”

Acts 9:1-9

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“As Saul neared Damascus suddenly a bright light flashed around him.”

Acts 9:3

Prayer of Preparation

Surprise us, risen Christ, with your love and grace, in the fellowship of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Message

There is a story about a woman from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who fell asleep on the couch after her husband had gone to bed. An intruder sneaked in through the sliding door, which the couple had forgotten to lock, and crept through the house. He entered the bedroom where the husband was sleeping and picked up the television set. The sleeping man woke up, saw a figure standing there, and whispered, “Honey, come to bed.” The burglar panicked, put down the TV, grabbed a stack of money from the dresser, and ran out.

But the thief was in for a big surprise! The money turned out to be a stack of pamphlets from the couples’ church, with an explanation of the love and forgiveness God offers. Instead of the cash he expected, the intruder got the story of God’s love for him.¹

I wonder what Saul expected when he realized it was *Jesus* appearing to him on the road to Damascus, since he had been persecuting and even killing followers of Jesus? Saul, later called Paul, must have been surprised by God’s grace toward him, which he later calls a “gift” in the Letter to the Ephesians, where he writes: “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power” (Eph. 3:7).

¹ Story found on the internet.

Let me ask you: When have you ever been surprised by the gift of God's grace in your life, with the risen Christ showing you love and forgiveness?

God of Surprises

To the Christian, the surprises of God come in all kinds of ways. The story of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus is one of those stories (Acts 9:1-9). But there are more, of people who are going through life, heading in one direction, or thinking of life as happening one way and then God's intrudes to reveal a new path.

In other words, there is this realization that what we *think* happens doesn't happen the way it *actually* happens. That's the reality of history, of course. It doesn't go in a straight line. It is also the reality of God's mysterious but providential ways in the world, often confounding us, as we ask, what is God up to?

Over the years, I know my own theory of change has changed! I don't see life as going from Point A to Point B in a linear fashion. Instead, I see life often going from Point A to B and then back to A and then jumping over to Point D and back to Point C, often with zigzags and curly cues.

I know I might have shared this story before but when Peggy and I came back from school in Germany to take our first appointment in the South Indiana Conference, we told ourselves (and I think Bishop Hodapp) that we did not want to go to Terre Haute to serve. We had something else in mind. Where did we end up going? That's right! Terre Haute. God had other plans. And looking back we can thank God, for we met Charles and Eunice Hutchinson, or "Hutch," who was a member here, as my first DS. And then Dale Harner and Ann Glass – all people I have come to respect and cherish. There is always more to the story when we are open to God.

I think this insight gets to a wonderful quote I heard a student of mine in the Course of Study share with me the other day; it goes, "If you want to make God laugh, make plans." It is roughly based on Psalm 2:4 that says, "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at our well-made plans." Put differently, God has other things in mind when God surprises us.

Think of the peoples of ancient Near East when they built a tower to God on the plains of Babel. The story speaks of the consequences of what can take place when we attempt to be "one people with one language" (Gen. 11:6), as our

attempts at such uniformity too often regress into a dictatorial order which takes on divine authority. God's coming upon the people at Babel and dispersing them and their language was God's way of saying to folks: God has other plans, other ways.

Or think of Moses when he tries to hide from God by attending to his father-in-law's flock of sheep: he encounters God in a burning bush. God tells Moses and instructs him to go back to Egypt to lead the people out of Bondage. Moses had his plans, but God had other plans, too, other ways (Exodus 3:12).

Or look at Jonah when he gets out of Dodge and runs the other way rather than go to Nineveh to preach repentance. God catches up with Jonah in the belly of a great fish. Jonah has his plans, but God has other plans as well (2:1-10).

Or consider Mary, a lowly peasant girl. The Holy Spirit overshadows her with the message of bearing God's Son. Mary encounters God in a way that changes the course of her life forever. Mary is minding her own business, but God has another direction in mind (Luke 1). They all share a common theme: God has ways of surprising us his people.

If you have ever read the book *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis, you will find a similar story of how God caught Lewis and how Lewis, an atheist, moved in a direction in life he was not expecting. It was not a cataclysmic event, but it was a surprise, as it happened during an ordinary ride to the zoo on a motorcycle. It was then that Lewis moved toward the Christian faith. It came in a way Lewis did not intend or plan.²

The story of Mother Teresa makes this point too. On September 10, 1946, while taking a train ride, Teresa felt a calling. As she later explained, ". . . I heard the call of God. The message was quite clear: I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them." Though as she also recalled: while the message was clear, the path to get there was not, adding that "I knew where I belonged, but I did not know how to get there."

Initially, the local Archbishop rejected her request. He found the idea of a European-born Catholic sister living and ministering in Calcutta's poorest slums to be too unusual. But Teresa was undeterred in her wish to work among the "poorest of the poor," and in 1948, her persistence paid off as the archbishop gave her permission to start.

² William H. Willimon, *Will Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 283.

Notice each person's encounter with Christ is unique, notice how each person begins a new journey. But also notice what they all have common: the God of grace is full of surprises.

Pauls' Encounter

Now enter the apostle Paul: In our passage today, the risen Christ surprises Paul, known as Saul, on the road to Damascus. Saul is a Pharisee, and he does all he can to destroy the church from the get-go. In fact, he has just overseen the killing of Stephen in the previous chapter (Acts 8).

But the encounter with Christ on the road leaves Paul blind, for three days. Scales fall from his eyes. He doesn't eat or drink. It is a painful conversion. He was heading down the road to persecute and kill the followers of Jesus. Now, he is becoming one of them.

There are a few things to remember when we read this passage. The first thing to remember is that we often read this passage through the eyes of Martin Luther. Here, we can think of Saul as a man in search of something, a person who finally finds what he is looking for.³

The problem with this is that there is nothing in the story that says Paul was searching for something other than Christians to persecute (Acts 9:2). This is not a story of a man who is miserable until he finds a gracious God (Luther's story); rather, it a story of someone who, without warning, is encountered by the living Christ (Acts 9:3-4). Paul is not going to a Billy Graham crusade; he is not going to a workshop on how to find meaning in life. No, he is on his way to find and eliminate the followers of the Way, of Jesus.

I say this because it is possible, as preachers are so wanting to do, to over preach this passage. That is to say, it is possible for me as a preacher to take a passage like this and say more than the passage says, and just keep going on and on, expounding the same points, until folks start to fall asleep and say, "Alright already. I get the point."

I will never forget in Vincennes the comment a member of the church once made to me about preaching. He had a reputation for being hard on ministers. The previous pastors of the church all warned me about him. He ate ministers every

³ Ibid., 282.

Sunday for lunch. But one Sunday, Jim said to me, “You repeat yourself too much in your sermons. Go back and look at how many times you do it.” I did. And he was right. Sometimes we can say too much.

The second way we can over preach a passage like this is to say what the passage doesn't say and add more to the story. That's not good either. To be sure, this passage has accumulated baggage over the years. For example, this passage does not say that everyone needs to have a conversion experience like Paul. That's not what this passage is about. Nowhere does it say that. In fact, read the passage carefully, and you will discover what the passage is about: encountering Christ unexpectedly.

Think of it another way: God uses many avenues and channels to meet people: – whether going to Peter along the sea, or to a woman by the well, or to Nicodemus at night, or to Zacchaeus in his home. The scriptures don't prescribe a one-size-fits-all experience to the Christian faith. If they did, I know I would probably fail the test. I didn't have a dramatic call or conversion to Christ like Paul. No, it was more like a growing awareness that God's grace was real and that there were people who communicated and demonstrated that grace to me over time. I was loved into the kingdom, so to speak! It wasn't spectacular, but it was life-turning.

What about you?

I don't believe there is only one way to experience the risen Christ. Instead, what we need to see is how such experience is always followed by faithfulness, by displaying the fruit of the Holy Spirit, like love, joy, peace, patience (Gal. 5:7-8). True conversion will always lead to a life of commitment, to living the commandments of loving God and neighbor. Indeed, if a person is not demonstrating such activity following their meeting Christ, we might ask if conversion has taken place.

Remember that the person who was persecuting Christians here, Paul, is also the same person who will write to the Corinthians that “love is patient and kind; not envious or boastful.” There was a real change.

I feel that this is what John Wesley discovered in the 18th century: there were people who simply went through the motions of the Christian faith, and there were people who really got it, who really did receive grace and live it, in surprising and unexpected ways.

There were people like John Newton, a priest in the Church of England and a person who took part in the slave trade, who finally woke up to God and turned to God, stopping his involvement in such evil, raising the question – how does a person who participates in chattel slavery write the hymn “Amazing Grace,” unless that person has encountered such grace, where their inner, moral compass no longer receives its direction from what is false, but from what is true?

Closing

It is a great question, for only God knows us, and only God can change us. Only God can work in our lives according to who we are, and not according to preconceived model. God acts in those surprising moments when we are proceeding down one path, just busy looking out for ourselves, and then there comes, as if out of nowhere, a light, a voice, a summons, where we know we have been cornered, and like C.S. Lewis, we end up muttering what he said following his encounter with Christ: “Lord, it was you all along.”

Have you ever known such a surprising and disrupting and transforming meeting with the risen Christ? Well, if not, here is the Easter promise: you will. You will. Amen.