

Third Sunday of Easter  
May 5, 2019  
Church of the Advent  
Rev. Ellen Richardson

### Surprises of God

Our readings today are about the surprises of God, sometimes shocking and sometimes tender, always unexpected. The first is the story of Saul of Tarsus, a righteous educated Jewish Pharisee who is on his way to Damascus with letters from the High Priest giving him permission to offer what Acts called “threats and murder” to followers of The Way. Legend and many artistic renderings of this story put Saul on a large white horse, then knocked off by a bolt of lightning, though there is no mention of a horse in this telling. Nevertheless, Saul is probably shocked to be knocked to the ground and coping with a blinding flash of light from heaven, and a voice out of the clouds questioning his motives and his purposes in persecuting the followers of Jesus. Saul was blinded by his dramatic experience, which none of his companions saw or heard. Probably thinking Saul had lost his mind, they carried him in his new state of helplessness to Damascus, where he did not eat or drink for three days.

The second surprise comes in the continuation of Saul's story in Damascus, when a man named Ananias was asked by God in a vision to go to the despicable Saul with a healing touch. It is interesting that conversing with God does not seem unusual to Ananias, but the request to render aid to one who had done “much evil to your saints in Jerusalem” called for some discussion and a bit of argument. It would not be too much of a stretch for us to hear Ananias saying, “Seriously? This guy?” And of course the answer is yes, *this* guy.

...the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Perhaps the most surprising part of the story is not that Ananias went to Saul and by laying hands on him cured his blindness, but that Saul, who we came to know as Paul, was immediately baptized and began proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. It is always surprising whom God

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chooses to call into his work in the world, and we tend to resist some of God's choices as unlikely messengers. The only thing that should *not* surprise us is that God chooses the unexpected and the unprepared to bring about his kingdom.

Our second story today is a happier surprise, my favorite resurrection story—the quiet and furtive appearance of Jesus to the disciples on a beach of the Sea of Tiberias, another name for the Sea of Galilee. The disciples were fishing, something they had been good at before they dropped their nets to follow Jesus, but this particular night they had not done so well. At dawn, a man on the shore they did not recognize told them to drop their nets on the right side of the boat, and they caught so many fish that they could not haul in the net and had to drag it beside the boat to the shore. Someone evidently bothered to count them—there's always one accountant in every bunch—and there were 153 fish. Much theological speculation has gone into the significance of that number though it remains a mystery.

Peter stands out in this story, and in usual Peter fashion does something impulsive, jumping into the sea and swimming to the shore when he recognizes the Lord's work in the haul of fish jumping in the net—for to Peter that was the only explanation for something so astonishing. When he reached the beach, there was little drama, just an invitation to breakfast, fish over a charcoal fire, and bread. And then disciples knew the risen Jesus, if not by the fish, then by the breaking of the bread.

This Easter story of Jesus and the disciples on the beach is just one of the Resurrection stories in the great 50 days of Eastertide, allowing us to bask in its miracle, its beauty, and its foundational assurance that our God is with us always, in surprising ways. It is the season to get comfortable sitting around that warming campfire on the beach with Jesus, basking in his love and care for us, tasting those fresh fish cooked over a charcoal fire, passing the bread, and trying to take it all in.

Yet there is a “rest of the story,” that we hear in a conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks three times if Peter loves him, as if each declaration of his love cancels out his earlier denial of Jesus after his arrest and before his crucifixion. This conversation is slow and drawn

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out, punctuated by the repetition of Jesus asking Peter to “feed his sheep.” And then as if to seal their covenant, Jesus says something that John actually interprets for us:

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.

This is not just a warning, but a promise—that commitment to the work of God comes with personal cost that we do not at first really care to imagine. Resurrection is not something we are to take lightly. We have to have some skin in the game, for being a follower of Christ is not a spectator sport that we can schedule into our busy lives at our convenience. If we take our faith as seriously as Paul did when his sight was restored, or as Peter did, when he jumped into the sea to swim to shore—because the boat would not get him to his Lord fast enough—then we should not be surprised if God looks for something more from us, too.

In our long overarching story as people of God, by now we should probably not be so surprised at whom God chooses to lead his people, to work in his vineyards, to bring about his kingdom, and yet it is still hard not to be. God chose Abraham, and Jacob, Joseph and Moses; he chose David and Solomon, Ruth and Naomi, Ezekiel and Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah, Mary and Joseph, Nicodemus and Ananias. God chose Peter, who seemed so often to be blundering and dense, and ready to turn tail when things started to go south; he chose Paul, who had been so full of zeal to put Christ-followers to death. All surprising choices—none perfect and some far from it, but all willing to invite God to work through them to further God's purposes in the salvation of the world. Some were called with signs and wonders, visions or voices; some were called gently to sit down beside a campfire for breakfast, or to the breaking of the bread. At least one needed to be knocked off a horse.

However our God calls each of us into a community of believers, as followers of Jesus, however surprising that wake up call to God's love comes to each of us, we are to understand by these stories today that sometimes God's surprises come with risk and challenge. Sometimes they will blind us for a while, until we get the point that we are not meant to be self-sufficient.

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Sometimes they will lead us to those we may not know--or even fear--carrying God's healing in our hands. Sometimes they will prompt us to jump into the sea, and sometimes they will lead us where we do not wish to go. And yet there is no joy comparable to dropping our nets just one more time at daybreak after catching nothing all night, and finding that our nets are so full that we can barely haul them in.

The surprises of God are the gifts we need to see to the kingdom work that is left undone. May we accept the grace to rise and meet our surprising calls from God with Peter's response, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." because there are still sheep to be fed. Amen.



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