

Easter 7
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

May 17, 2015
Rev. Paul Moore

Surprises

Ours is a God of history. I was sitting in a High School prayer circle in my senior year of high school. I wanted be a bird scientist, or a pilot, but I also wanted to do what God wanted me to do. I prayed earnestly, and an answer came to me: “I want you to serve full time in the Church.” That was one in a long line of surprises.

My response was, "Sure, I'll do that, just don't ask me to preach every Sunday." I went into Christian education, then I went into missions. We were living in Dallas, working with Wycliffe Bible Translators. We knew we were called to go overseas, but we needed financial backing. We began visiting different churches. We had visited an Episcopal church and been touched by the mystery and beauty of the liturgy, but we didn't put much hope in an Episcopal church teaming up with us for our mission work. We had begun attending a little Presbyterian church and found that on our way to and from Church we were driving right by The Episcopal Church of our Savior. So, what to do? Do we go with our heads and remain with the Presbyterians, or risk financial support, and go with our hearts? Of course, as soon as you've framed a question that way you know the answer. We visited Our Savior, and a year later we were confirmed. (The money to go to the mission field came in anyway!)

And then one day my priest said to me, “You need to think about the priesthood.” Yeah, right—and preach every Sunday? Surprise! But I couldn't let it go, and 5 years later I was preaching every Sunday! I find that I love it. All the significant turning points in my life have come as surprises. Some have been surprises in that I didn't see them coming, but even the ones that I knew were coming rarely turned out how I expected. That's because our God is a God of history.

The Bible is full of surprises. Here are some major ones:

- The Hebrews in the Exodus: Can you imagine the surprise of Pharaoh when his band of Hebrew slaves escapes from one of the strongest armies in the world at the time?
- Can you imagine the surprise of the Hebrews when the water stood up on one side and the other, and then they saw their pursuers drowned behind them?
- Jesus' birth: Can you imagine the shepherds? The wise men? Joseph and Mary when each of these parties visited them?
- Jesus' death—and then resurrection: Can you imagine the depth of sorrow turned to incredible joy in the disciples?

- Pentecost: Can you just see a band of cowardly disciples who had up to this point been in hiding suddenly transformed into vibrant preachers and evangelists?

This episode with Cornelius recorded in our first lesson is the next big surprise. Peter is a good Jew. He knows what the law requires. He has maintained kosher. He has avoided ritual impurity at every turn, including entering Gentile homes. Now by a vision he understands that the Spirit seems to be taking him to a Gentile home to eat whatever they set before him. When he preaches about Jesus all of a sudden the Spirit descends on them all. What new kind of Gospel is this that breaks down the barriers that symbolized moral purity and superiority? Obviously this God is a God of surprises, a God invested in human history.

Let's go back to the ancient Hebrews again. The gods of the Egyptians were gods of the afterlife. The gods of the Canaanites were gods of the cycles of life, climate and agriculture. The Exodus and then the Incarnation show God to be a God involved in human history. The difference really is profound. A god of the afterlife focuses your life on your death, making for elaborate pyramidal tombs. A god of fertility focuses your life on the next harvest or lambing season. A God of history focuses on community. The gods of the Egyptians didn't rescue slaves. The gods of the Canaanites were unconcerned with the oppressed. On the other hand, a God of history is concerned with these things. Only a God of history could love and be loved through the vicissitudes of life. Only a God of history would tell people to love one another as they love God. Only a God of history can require surrender of the innermost heart. What a surprise!

God is not only the God of the history of the Hebrews. God is the God of your history and mine. A God of your history means that the Source of all Being, of all that is good, lovely and true, wants to walk with you through life. There is comfort in knowing that you're not in this game all alone. There is purpose and direction to human living, both individually and collectively. We are made in, by and for love. It's that simple and that profound.

But a God of history also means that God reserves the right to surprise you. Surprises that are merely enjoyable and unexpected are one thing, but surprises that change the course of your life are not always so welcome. They require the work of surrender. Surrender means letting God hold your future as well as your past. Surrender means allowing God to bring about changes that you might not have anticipated; changes in the way the Church works, changes in the liturgy, changes in what we do and don't do, changes in who is important to you and who is not, and changes in your priorities, even (as with Peter) changes in what you thought was right and what was wrong.

So how do we live with divine surprises? The first lesson to learn is surrender. My dad used to say he could manage his time fine if he could only schedule his interruptions! Of all of the many things that impinge upon our lives, God is the hardest one to schedule, yet God insists, as the God of our histories, on being involved. Divine surprises can always be trusted. Surprises will prove to be divine with time, trust and tenacity. Just go with the flow when God surprises you. It'll be good in the end.

The second lesson is to live in the present. A Zen disciple asked the master about what kind of sight was needed for enlightenment. The master said, "The ordinary kind."

"Why, then, do I not see?"

"You have to be here to see," said the Master, "but mostly you're somewhere else."

Jesus calls us to be fully awake, to live in the here and now, the eternal moment of the present. Surprises annoy or disturb us when we're languishing in the past or fretting over the future, but NOW is when God acts.

Finally, learn to see. When I was a kid in Ecuador from time to time I would visit my friend who lived with the Cofan people. We would go fishing with them in the rivers using nets. The Indians could always see the fish in the dirty water, but I never could. We don't have that kind of fish where I grew up, and never learned how to see them. The reason the presence of God surprises you is because you didn't expect what you got. Each surprise, however, bears in it the telltale evidence of how God works in your life. If you watch you will see patterns in your interactions with God, ways that your relationship works. Compare your perceptions, then, with patterns in the Bible and in the lives of those you know and read about. Share these stories in your Home Groups. These patterns become the lens through which you begin to view your whole life—as a life walked in fellowship with your Creator and Redeemer.

God reserves the right to surprise us. Thanks be to God for that, for a God who would surprise us is one who would walk with us, sharing our histories, and forming, informing and sustaining our living.