

Sermon for Sunday, August 17th, 2014 Gen 45:1:14, Matt 15: (10-20), 21-28 "Unexpected"

The older I get, the more I like predictability. Knowing what's going to happen when. Being sure that if I drive down road A I will get to destination B. Expecting certain results when I do something and having those results occur. Can I hear an "amen?"

But time and time again, the results turn out different than I expect. The road is shut for repaving and I have to drive a different way, worrying the whole time if I will get to my destination on time. The alarm clock doesn't go off because we lost power in the night and it reset, and now I'm late.

I hate it when that happens...don't you?

Now put yourself in Joseph's shoes – or sandals, or whatever they wore in ancient Egypt. He's looking pretty impressive, with his golden chain of office, his jet black wig and golden headdress, his eye makeup – think KISS without Gene Simmons waving his tongue around. He's survived being sold off by his brothers to traders headed for Egypt, serving as a slave, being jailed after a false accusation, interpreting Pharaoh's dream successfully, becoming Pharaoh's right hand man. Not bad for an annoying Israelite show-off boy wonder.

Or if you cannot imagine yourself in that Egyptian headdress, pretend you're one of Joseph's brothers. You've been sent to Egypt because there is a famine back home, and you have to beg for food. You have to make your case to Pharaoh's chief aide, who seems powerful and strange in the way all Egyptians seem strange to Israelites, but also oddly familiar. And the fellow excuses himself to go into another room, where he starts sobbing loudly enough for everyone to hear. And when he comes out, he reveals he is your long-lost brother, the one who got sold into slavery so many years before.

I think that counts as a not-so-pleasant surprise, right? Something unpredictable and unexpected happens, and you wonder how it will change your world, and you're not a little bit scared.

Sometimes I like to imagine God in heaven looking at us and saying, "Hey, wait a minute. I set everything up so things would work out just so, and then you upset the apple cart. Why are you so surprised things didn't turn out as you expected?"

Yup, even God occasionally gets surprised. We humans, given free will, sometimes react in unpredictable ways.

Think about the Gospel story.

Jesus is out in the borderlands, after another argument with the Pharisees. Not surprisingly, he wins the argument, but he hightails it out of town because he knows they will want revenge for him embarrassing them yet again.

Jesus and the disciples are hiding out in Gentile territory. They think no one knows them around here, that at least they are safe from the Pharisees here. They can regroup.

But what happens? Some weird woman shows up. A Samaritan, part of an enemy tribe. She's alone, which gives Jesus two good reasons not to interact with her. And in a normal situation, she would avoid him as much as he wants to avoid her.

But it's not a normal situation. Something unexpected is happening here. She is desperate. She is willing to risk anything to get help, and she believes this man may be able to help her. So she goes to him, against all the rules on both sides of the border, and begs him for help.

He also does something unexpected. He ignores her.

Wait...our wonderful loving Jesus who always hangs out with all sorts of people the rules say he should be with...he ignores this particular woman? That's unexpected!

But she won't take no for an answer, and keeps begging him for help, even though he's already made a fool of her by ignoring her.

So now he'll help, right?

No. He calls her a dog, undeserving of her help. He's only supposed to help his own kind, not some crazy lady who ventures across the border looking for assistance for her child.

He calls her a dog. That's unexpected. Jesus must be having a bad day or something, right?

So now she'll go slinking back across the border... but she doesn't. She gets up in his face and says "even dogs get a crumb every now and then."

Women in that society didn't argue. They didn't talk back. They didn't get up in a stranger's face, particularly when the stranger was of another tribe. But this woman does, unexpectedly and forcefully.

Is she crazy or desperate or both? I mean, this is Jesus. The Son of God. All the power of divinity within him. She knows this, or she wouldn't have asked for his help. She knows he could hurt her just by thinking the thought. And yet she still does the unexpected thing. She argues with him.

And he folds. He says "yes, I'll heal your daughter. Your faith has saved her."

The Son of God who has bested every rabbi, every scribe, every temple priest, folds like an old one dollar bill in the face of this woman's righteous indignation on behalf of her daughter. Unexpected.

Maybe even God can be surprised sometimes.

Or perhaps God is surprised all too often. When we watch boys being gunned down for walking down the wrong street. When we see little children crossing a border – as if we own the land that is God's creation – trying to find safety, and we treat them as if they were dogs. When we watch the people whom we pay to amuse us fall victim to illness and curse them as sinners for taking their own lives, as if we understand what they having been going through, as if we are in God's position and have the right to judge. When we say that one group of people halfway around the world are right and another are wrong, for our own political gain rather than for justice and peace.

Yes, God witnesses these things. God shouldn't be surprised. We've done things like this before. And yet, as God's own beloved creations, made in his image, he expects more of us than that.

Wouldn't it be an unexpected pleasure for our maker if what surprised him was how we loved one another? Wouldn't God be delighted if we gave comfort to those who are desperate? Wouldn't God say "Aha! Now you've got it!" if we laid down our swords and beat them into plowshares to feed a hungry world?

We can still be surprised by people doing things that shock and amaze us.

I expect that God can still be surprised by God's creatures as well. Let's work on making it a good and unexpected pleasure, rather than a moment where God shakes his head and thinks, "who's the dog now?"

Amen.