

The Good News is So Good It Catches Us By Surprise

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There is a part of a Wendell Berry poem that says:

When my father was an old man,
past eighty years, we sat together
on the porch in silence
in the dark. Finally he said,
"Well, I have had a wonderful life,"
adding after a long pause,
"and I have had nothing
to do with it!"

I feel quite sure that if you had posed the question to me in my teens or twenties of how much the choices I made had to do with how my life would turn out, I would have said, "a lot." In these times, and in this country, most of us have grown up with the idea that we can do anything we put our minds to and that our choices add up to our lives. I've spent a lot of my life weighing choices with pro and con lists, certain that the right choice would lead me to the best life possible. And yes, of course, we make choices along the way that have significant consequences and play a part in the kind of life we live.

But, as I peer around the corner at turning 50 in a few years and take the time to look back on my life, I find there's far more that came as a surprise, that I had basically nothing to do with, both good and bad, which did at least as much, if not far more, to shape my life. Things I never could have imagined. Things I never even knew would be a choice. For example, when choosing to go to seminary led to the end of a long relationship, I didn't know that seminary would be where I met my future husband.

Or, you could never have prepared me for the idea that I would end up serving a church in the hometown I left at 18. I didn't choose the neighbors who have become dear friends or the illnesses and injuries I've had. Yes, I've made choices to do this or that, but how I've come to be this person, in this place, with these people, is far more of a surprise than I ever anticipated.

Which brings me to today's gospel story. When we think about Jesus, I'm not sure how often we think of surprise. But in the gospel of John, the very first thing Jesus does, his very first public act of ministry, is to pull off a surprise with an act of such great abundance everyone is completely amazed. He could have surprised them just by

turning some water into some two buck chuck, but Jesus turns jug upon jug of water into 900 bottles worth of the very finest wine. Surprise! This is the kind of surprise no one could have seen coming. This surprise defies even the grandest imagination. It surpasses anyone's understanding of reality. It is the kind of surprise that leaves people speechless and pinching themselves to see if they are awake.

While other gospels have Jesus making speeches or getting run out of town, John begins with this fantastic, miraculous surprise. Jesus' first act is a reminder of all the ways God will confound our imagination and surprise us with what seems too good to be true.

Jesus' first act of public ministry in John is a miracle so abundant, so surprising, it must be about more than making sure the party kept going. In fact, all of the signs and miracles in the gospel of John are meant to show us something about the character of God. They are meant to help us understand more of who God is. God is a God of good surprises; of things bigger than what we are able to imagine ourselves; of abundance that laughs in the face of scarcity.

We, too often, have imagined God as serious, humorless and dull. Too often, we have imagined God as a strict schoolmarm looking down on us with great judgement expecting us to always make the "right" choices and do "the right thing." Too often, we think of a relationship with God as being the same as following a rigid belief system that will make sure we live the "one right way." But surprise, God is funny and creative and imaginative and joyful.

A mystic poet, Hafiz, wrote a poem called "Tripping Over Joy" that says:
What is the difference
between your experience of Existence
and that of a saint?

The saint knows
that the spiritual path
is a sublime chess game with God

and that the Beloved
has just made such a Fantastic Move

that the saint is now continually
tripping over Joy
and bursting out in Laughter
and saying, "I Surrender!"

Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think
you have a thousand serious moves.

We look at our lives as a series of a thousand serious moves, when God is hoping to delight and surprise us. I don't mean to imply that we stop making choices or that the choices we make don't matter, but Jesus invites us to let go of believing they are all that matters or that we can control all outcomes. Which is not something that comes easily to us. We may like the idea of good surprises, but most of the time we prefer control, predictability and patterns. We like facts and figures we are sure are the truth. We want the known and comfortable, even when there might be something better. And there is Jesus talking about a kingdom of God where everyone has enough; a kingdom of God that is already here with us; a kingdom of God so abundant, so outrageous, we think it has to be an exaggeration.

But, Jesus performs miracles like this, so we would take seriously the possibility that the kingdom of God might actually look the way Jesus describes it, even when that seems to defy reality. It would be easy to doubt these outlandish claims, but when Jesus turns water into 900 bottles of wine; when he feeds 5000 people from a few loaves and fishes; when he heals people who have been sick for years; when we does these unimaginable, astounding, surprising things, it sticks with us; it makes us question what we thought we knew; it shakes us up out of our day to day and makes us wonder if, just maybe, there isn't more possible in this world than we thought.

It's interesting to pay attention to who Jesus chooses to have witnessed him turning water into wine. It isn't the bride and groom and wedding guests. It's the servants. The witnesses are the ones who are typically the last and the least, possessing little power and control over their own lives. Yet here, in the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, we already see God's great reversal starting to take hold as the last and the least become the first ones to see the revealing of the joy and fullness of God that is Jesus." And perhaps that is because those who are used to being ignored or undervalued or underestimated are often the ones who are open enough to be surprised. They don't have enough to take much for granted. Maybe they are the ones who already know something about how life is less about our choices; less predictable; unable to be controlled; and more about being ready to receive the surprises along the way.

When I would take youth on mission trips, one of the things we were always careful about was the myth of the "happy poor." Taking wealthy Americans to a place of great poverty, often they are expecting to find people who are downtrodden and without hope, but that is not usually what they find. They find people who sing and laugh while

they work. People who offer incredible hospitality, even with meager resources. People who worship God wholeheartedly. People who give to their neighbors and community however they can. And the danger for the wealthy Americans is they come home thinking poverty isn't so bad after all.

But the people aren't happy because of poverty. Happy isn't the right word. What we would witness on those trips were people who were deeply tied to their community because they know they can't do it all on their own. We met people who know something deep about hope and faith. We encountered people who expected God to surprise them in all kinds of ways because they had experienced God's surprises and they were actively looking for God to show up. We certainly took resources with us to these poor places, but when we said we took more away than we gave, it was about understanding our own obsession with control and belief that if we have enough money, status, or education that somehow we won't need other people or God as much.

Jesus' regular practice of surprising people with miracles that defied expectation is a window into what God is like. God loves a surprise. God loves making a way out of no way. God loves showing us again and again that there is abundance where we thought there was scarcity. I'm careful not to call God a magician – magic is about tricks while miracles are signs pointing to something greater - but I do think God has a real sense of showmanship. God is good at that rabbit out of the hat ta-da moment.

So here we are at the beginning of Lent. Lent is a season of repentance and penitence. It is a time to deepen our relationship with God through giving up things which distract us from God or taking on new spiritual practices which may draw us closer. It is a time for preparing our hearts for hearing again the dramatic, emotional story of betrayal, suffering and death of Jesus at the hands of both the empire and his dearest friends. And that is a lot of serious stuff.

But never forget that Lent is also the season leading up to the greatest surprise of all. A surprise that defies our grandest imagination. A surprise which surpasses any understanding of reality. A surprise that should leave us speechless and pinching ourselves to see if we are awake. All as a reminder that the good news is so good that it will catch us by surprise. When we are 100% sure things will never change, things will never get better, nothing we can do will make a difference, the world just is a certain way or when we are positive that we can control things enough if we just make the right choices, that is when we should be ready for God to do something we never expected. When we just might join the saint "tripping over Joy and bursting out in Laughter and saying, "I Surrender!"

