

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

February 15, 2009

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14; 1Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Sermon: "Expect to be Surprised"

One of the most memorable aspects of growing up in the Frey family over the years was that we were a family that liked surprises. We never disclosed the contents of the gifts that we wrapped and gave each other at Christmas. Vacations and trips always had elements of surprise to them like a special activity or an untried restaurant. This carried over into my married life where Cathy and I would take mystery trips that were full of surprises. I still enjoy injecting the element of surprise into the lives of my grown children.

Cathy, my wife, has learned to tolerate and at times appreciate this side of my behavior. I believe that expecting surprises is very basic to the scripture texts this morning. In fact, I believe that it is an important part of following Jesus Christ. If you are going to be a Christian in the world today then you need to expect surprises.

William Willimon has suggested, "If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Messiah, then there is a safe bet that you will not be able to fully understand him, to comprehend him, or adequately to define him and his significance. Perhaps understanding, comprehension, definition are not the point. There is always going to be some distance between us and the living God. There is always going to be shock and surprise, if we are to be encountered by the living God."<sup>1</sup>

And that is why we are here this morning! We want to be encountered by the living God. Yet, too many of us want to be in control of the encounter. It is

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, "Divine Distance," *Pulpit Resource*, February 15, 2009, 29.

difficult to give up control and allow the movement of God's Holy Spirit to transform our lives. Status in the community, past histories, levels of trust, personal needs, and many other issues create barriers that prevent us from being open to the mysterious, awe-inspiring nature of God's movement in our lives.

The well polished story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-14 is a story that causes all of us to look in the mirror. We are so much like this famous Syrian army commander of the past. He wanted to be healed, but he couldn't get past his own notions of how God must act. Naaman had ideas that were trapping him and not allowing him to be freed up for God's healing power. He was blocking God.

What does a little servant girl know? Surely, God expected him to do more to find healing. He knew about greater rivers. How could dipping seven times in the tiny Jordan River bring about the great healing he needed? Boy was he surprised when he gave in to the idea and found that his skin was cleansed of all the leprosy!

What signs and signals has God been sending your way that you have ignored? How has your pride and arrogance stopped the movement of God's healing presence? Where have you missed the surprising presence of God because of your desire to control God? This morning Jesus is calling to you and wants you to be surprised by the wonder of God's loving and healing presence.

Even with all of his reservations, Naaman went down to the Jordan River and did as he was instructed. He didn't have sufficient answers to his questions. He bathed in the Jordan. He was healed. Strange. Surprising.

The Gospel story for us this morning is different. We feel a bit distanced by it. Jesus healed the leper and sent him off to the priests for verification so that he could re-enter the community. Keep quiet about this healing Jesus told the leper. Mark's messianic secret. But, we know that isn't going to happen. How could it? The power of God in the world is not something that is able to be contained.

How do you feel about having a sovereign, free God who is independent of us and our desires? We are conditioned, as modern folk, to think that we are completely equipped to understand all mysteries, to comprehend all things. But if Jesus is truly the Son of God, as Mark's Gospel proclaims him to be, then there will be times, perhaps they are the best of times, when we shall feel quite distant from God.<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Peterson, author and theologian, has written "The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, controlled, and fixed."<sup>3</sup> I believe that life needs to be lived with an appreciation of the unknown and mysterious.

God wants us to live expecting to be surprised.

In our efforts to control, we may miss the wondrous actions of our surprising God. The Gospel lesson for today points to the Lord who breaks through the barriers. The dreaded disease of leprosy, which caused a person to be an outcast, could not stop Jesus from healing a man.

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<sup>2</sup> Willimon, 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> Willimon, 31.

The presence of the power of God in Jesus is presented in a rather strange manner: His simple touch heals, and the power of that touch cannot be kept secret. At the same time, it is clear that nothing is settled simply by faith in the miraculous, so long as one will not accept Jesus' unique gift which breaks through all boundaries between clean and unclean, between the people of God and outsiders, because this is the reason for Jesus' anger and his command to be silent. This is how Mark asks the reader whether he will surrender himself to this confrontation with God in Jesus and allow the traditional boundaries to be destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

Think of all the boundaries you can destroy in a single day. Following Jesus is all about allowing the love of God to flow into situations and people who have been marginalized and crushed by those who want to control. Now a big question for each of us is simply this: "Will we aid or block God's wondrous and surprising activity in the world?" The surprises can come at any time. They will come when we are on bended knee in prayer, reading the Bible, singing a hymn, writing a check for mission, or serving a breakfast to the homeless.

A living God can still surprise us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, Trans. Donald H. Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970), 58-59.