



## "A Life of Surprises"

Sunday, June 2, 2024

### Gospel Lesson, Mark 2:23-3:6

<sup>23</sup> One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

<sup>25</sup> He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? <sup>26</sup> In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

<sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

3:1 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. <sup>2</sup> Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. <sup>3</sup> Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

<sup>5</sup> He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. <sup>6</sup> Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

### Sermon, "A Life of Surprises"

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If you received your June *Parrish Visitor*, then you have also received a regular feature called “Connecting with the Word.” It lists the scriptures suggested each Sunday by the Revised Common Lectionary. Sometimes I even preach what has been suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary. When I first looked at the scriptures suggested for today, it seemed as though they had nothing in common with each other. But on further inspection, I saw that all four suggested scriptures told a story of surprises.<sup>1</sup>

The first lesson is about the boy Samuel who ministered before the Lord in the tabernacle. Apparently, Samuel’s job was to light the olive oil lamps on the seven-branched lampstand which is described in Exodus 25 (vs. 31-37). The lamps were lit at twilight and were kept burning “before the Lord from evening till morning” when they either burned out or were extinguished.

Sometime before dawn—

—the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”<sup>5</sup> And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down.

<sup>6</sup> Again the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

“My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.”

<sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

<sup>8</sup> A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup> So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

There are a couple of surprises in that passage. First, and most obviously, Samuel was surprised to find himself called of God—and at a young age. Samuel reminds us that anyone can be called of God; there are no age requirements. And that raises a question for us: **might God be calling me to serve him?**

This goes beyond mere volunteerism—and the church certainly needs volunteers. But even more importantly, God needs servants who will minister on his behalf. Might you be one of those servants? If you sense the nudging of the Spirit, the proper response is, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

The second surprise is more subtle. In the previous chapter, we were introduced to Eli’s priestly sons and their total disregard for the offerings which were presented to the priests by the people. The sons of Eli were greedy and demanding and as a result, God was about to reject them. And in rejecting the sons of Eli, God elevated the ministry of the young prophet Samuel. Samuel wasn’t even from the priestly line of Levi; Samuel was from the tribe of Ephraim! But that didn’t prevent God from calling him and using him for his divine purposes.

The next scripture suggested by the Lectionary is Psalm 139; it’s one of the most beautiful psalms in the Bible. It’s one that I often read when visiting folks in the hospital. But it’s also a psalm packed with surprises:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Abingdon Worship Annual 2024*, pg. 125.

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<sup>1</sup> You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

<sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

<sup>5</sup> You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain....

<sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Once again, there are at least two surprises in this passage. The first is that the psalmist David is surprised to know that he is so completely known by God. So often we think that we're insignificant; that we don't matter to anyone. But the truth is that we matter a great deal to God. God knows us, and God knows us intimately. And it can be a great surprise to us to realize that **God knows me, and God loves me.**

The second surprise is that God made me fearfully and wonderfully—despite my human frailties and imperfections. In God's eyes, I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

A few years ago, pop singer Lady Gaga had a hit singing "I was born this way / Don't hide yourself in regret / Just love yourself and you're set." A bit later in the song, she declares that "God makes no mistakes."

I realize the song has become an anthem for a certain segment of our society; however, all of us regardless of circumstances are born of God in the image of God. Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" has become an anthem of self-acceptance for *all* people, and it lines up nicely with Psalm 139, but with one clarification:

We can love ourselves because God knows us and loves us. Verse 14 reminds us that **I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**

And yet, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4 (vs. 5-7), we may be fearfully and wonderfully made, but we nonetheless made of clay. Paul said that mindful that God fashioned Adam out of the soil of the earth before breathing the breath of life into him.

<sup>5</sup> For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Second Corinthians, Psalm 139, and First Samuel each reveal a surprise to us: Paul's surprise is that we have the power to shine God's light. The psalmist reminds us that we have been created by God. Samuel reminds us that we have been called of God. And then Paul reminds us that we can fulfill our calling because **the power of God resides in us.** It resides in us through the Holy Spirit. God's power is our treasure, but that treasure is kept in jars of clay to remind us that the power within us is not our own; it is of God. And our status as clay jars is to remind us to remain humble.

That bit about clay jars takes on a twist in our Gospel lesson from Mark 2 and 3 which I read earlier. First, Jesus and his disciples pluck grain from the field on the Sabbath. Later, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. This time it's Jesus who's surprised. But he's not surprised the way Samuel or David or Paul are surprised. Those were good surprises. Rather, Jesus is surprised at the way the word

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of God and the gift of the Sabbath had been weaponized against God's people. In the words of Paul, the Pharisees had the "light of the knowledge of God's glory," but instead of taking on the characteristics of the light, they instead took on the characteristics of the jars of clay and extinguished the light.

I know it sounds like I'm picking on Jars of Clay, but I don't mean to do it. They're a great band hailing from Greenville in our own state of Illinois. But they do get their name from 2 Corinthians 4:7

Who were the Pharisees? They were nothing more than self-appointed guardians of public morality. They had no authority to enforce Jewish law. But they did have considerable influence on ordinary people who respected their expertise in handling Israel's ancestral laws and traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Even today, there is no shortage today of self-appointed guardians of public morality; there is no shortage of people who insist that society live according to their interpretation of what is right and wrong. And in Jesus' day as well as ours, such interpretations can lead to spiritual abuse.

Like many of you, I grew up at a time when Sunday was a day of rest. Stores were closed and there were many things you weren't supposed to do on Sunday. That was when one anxious father became aware of his little girl playing in the front yard on a Sunday afternoon. The father worried about what his neighbors might say about her supposedly irreverent conduct on the Lord's day. So he tells her to go play in the back yard where their neighbors would be less likely to see her carrying on. But the clever little girl asked, "But Dad, isn't it Sunday in the back yard, too?"<sup>3</sup>

Even early in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees decided that Jesus and his gang needed watching to see whether they were proper Jews. And that's what's happening in Mark 2 and 3. Mark puts the two stories side-by-side for emphasis.

Jesus doesn't back down. In the first story, Jesus puts himself on par with King David in the period when David had already been anointed king but had not yet been enthroned as king because Saul was still on the throne. It was a shocking claim!

In the second story, Jesus intentionally heals someone on the Sabbath. And when challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus makes it clear that showing mercy and doing good on the Sabbath far outweighs obedience to the Law. Or at least to their understanding of observing the Sabbath.

Jesus' surprise at the spiritual abuse of the Pharisees ought to lead us into surprising new revelations as well. First, is the surprise that through Jesus Christ, God's kingdom has burst onto the scene to "set us free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). And yet, I wonder if there are ways in which the church today can get so blinded by its commitment to what appear to be necessary rules that it fails to see God's healing and restorative work breaking through?<sup>4</sup>

May we continue to be surprised at the grace of God at work in our lives, and in our church. And may we use this surprise to continue God's work in our church and in our neighborhood.

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<sup>2</sup> NT Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, pg. 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 31.