

“Our Surprising God”
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Acts 9:1-20

We worship a God full of surprises. God often delights us with wonderful experiences that we don’t expect: falling in love, healing from disease, what some might call having “a bonus baby.” Occasionally, we witness an extraordinary surprise, and sometimes, we call those miracles. However, we also suffer from unwelcome surprises. What we expect or most want doesn’t materialize. In fact, quite often the opposite occurs.

Take, for instance, Saul. His job involved persecuting people who were following Jesus. As a faithful Jew, Saul sought to eradicate the blasphemous idea that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. To that end, he travelled to Damascus, where he planned to root out and imprison those subversive disciples of Jesus. Saul probably felt proud to participate in a holy crusade to purify the religion he loved.

On his way there, Saul was surprised by a brilliant light and a disembodied voice. The voice claimed to be Jesus, and that had to be disturbing. If what was happening was real, then Saul could only have concluded that he’d been opposing the long-awaited Messiah. If Saul was just hallucinating instead, then maybe he’d broken under the pressure and lost his mind. Neither of these possibilities proved promising for Saul’s current career.

What was worse, Saul was blinded by the experience. That must have come as a great shock. After all, Saul thought he was serving God in a noble cause. All of Saul’s assumptions about how the world worked suddenly came into question, as he staggered toward Damascus, where a disciple of Jesus named Ananias was waiting for him.

Ananias had heard through the grapevine that Saul, champion persecutor of Christians, was on his way to Damascus. Nothing less than their life and liberty were at stake. It was a dangerous, frightening time, so it's easy to see how Ananias believed his prayers had been answered when he received a vision from God, telling him that Saul was blind, but the instructions he received on how to handle this must have been shocking. The Lord said, in effect, "Go find Saul. Take Westport Road to the Watterson, get off at Exit 23, and take a right on Straight Street, and when you get there, heal him."

Imagine his response. "Say what? Lord, I think my cell phone just lost coverage, because what you just said didn't make any sense." Orders to go see, much less help, Saul was the last thing Ananias expected to hear. What a terrible surprise. So he resisted, citing Saul's track record, but God insisted, so Ananias summoned his courage, followed God's directions, and found Saul, blind and helpless.

Imagine the pain Saul had caused Ananias. He probably knew people personally who had suffered from persecution. Imagine the anxiety of waiting for Saul to show up in Damascus. So what did Ananias do? Stay at home? Pull his trusty Louisville Slugger from the closet before he left for Straight Street? No. Ananias laid hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ananias acted as God's agent of grace, and Saul could once again see. Now think about what could have happened next. With his sight back, Saul could have dismissed everything – the light, the voice, the blindness, even his recovery – as part of some sinister conspiracy. Maybe one of these crazy Jesus people had slipped something into his food, and Ananias showed up with the antidote. None of this could be real, because if Saul accepted recent events as acts of

God, then he had a choice to make, a sacrifice to offer, because the hunter would become the hunted; and the wise man, a fool. But surprise! Saul received baptism, and went on to become one of the most effective disciples of Jesus ever known.

Both Saul and Ananias endured terrifying surprises: blindness for one; the other, a command to heal a very dangerous man and give back his power to hurt people. Yet both of them also enjoyed wonderful surprises. Saul regained his sight. Ananias baptized a prominent persecutor of the faithful. But prior to those outcomes, they, along with everyone around them, experienced great fear and uncertainty. God's surprises tend to come that way. It's usually a mix. There's a little bit of both. And the story about Ananias and Saul, which is actually a story about God, reveals things we really need to know about who God is and how God operates.

First, God lets us know what's best for us, what best accords with His purpose for our lives. We may be slow to listen and neglect vision after vision because we find God's purposes mysterious, unexpected, and inconvenient. Sometimes, what God says seems sheer madness. But God perceives possibilities that we either cannot see or stubbornly refuse to see. We are often afflicted with a kind of spiritual blindness, somewhat like Saul's, simply because we refuse to open our eyes to the reality God has for us.

Second, God calls us to obey, not to take away our freedom, but to make us truly free. If we want to be really free, then we must obey the call of God, even when doing so means taking risks. Jesus told Saul to continue his journey to Damascus, when every fiber of his being probably wanted to go home and regroup, but Saul obeyed the voice of a man he had long regarded as a criminal.

Likewise with Ananias, the Lord ordered him help a violent enemy. Ananias probably would have liked nothing better than to see Saul blind for the rest of his life, but he didn't go

with his human instincts. He trusted the voice of Jesus and obeyed. Both of them obeyed the voice of Jesus. Both of them got more than they could have ever hoped for. Saul started a new, more abundant life, and Ananias brought into the faith a man who would author the letters we still study in the Bible. But perhaps most importantly, they were reconciled.

Third, this passage from Acts vividly exposes how there's no such thing as an individual Christian. Christians are created in community, by community, for community. If Jesus ever wrote anything designed to endure, it didn't. Or at least archaeologists haven't dug it up yet. Jesus created a community of disciples, a community of love and forgiveness, and the legacy of that small handful of people lives on in our congregation and in millions of Christian congregations across the world. Yes, Saul's conversion started in solitude with his vision on the road to Damascus, but it didn't reach fulfillment until Ananias healed and baptized him and brought him into the community of faith.

With these three insights, how can we be transformed into the kind of people, who like Saul and Ananias, can handle God's surprises in a faithful way? First, God wants us to open our hearts and accept the gift of grace. Seems easy enough, but it can be tough. The more extravagant the gift, the more reluctant we can be to accept it, and our God is extravagant beyond measure. Sometimes, we feel unworthy, or our pride gets in the way. What we need is humility, not false modesty or self-shaming, but the humble attitude that honors who we are as creatures made by God in His own image, with all the privileges and responsibilities that involves. Despite their differences, Saul and Ananias shared this essential trait of humility.

Saul starts off in the story as a terrible villain, but he pursued his mission because he wanted to obey God. Both men, each in their own way, knew who they were, that their true identity was tied up in humble relationship with God, and they acted out of this identity to serve

and obey God, even when it didn't make sense to them. Their humility empowered them to accept God's gift of grace, which made their lives worthwhile and enjoyable, and memorable – here we are talking about them almost 2,000 years after they walked the Earth.

We, too, need to obey as they did, unafraid of what might happen, looking forward to what God has in store for us. When we obey the voice of Jesus, we take another step toward our transformation into people who can handle God's surprises faithfully.

And finally, we do all this in the landscape of a faithful community, from which we draw strength and courage and accountability that helps confirm that what we hear really is the voice of Jesus. Without Ananias, Saul's conversion might not have been completed. God would have probably just asked a more responsive disciple to take Ananias' place. Who knows? What Ananias represents is the Body of Christ in action, reaching out toward those who need the healing power of Jesus: reaching out to those who don't know they need God; reaching out to those who know they need God but don't want it; even reaching out to those who hate Jesus and the Body of Christ and everything we stand for. Inspired by grace, we can foster change, and through our work, God transforms us and others.

So prepare for surprises. God is a big fan. I know it sounds like an oxymoron to prepare for surprises, but if we stay aware that we worship a God full of surprises, we will be ready enough when the moment comes. And though some surprises may be unpleasant, at least at first, with God's guidance we can endure the strangeness of grace and learn to celebrate it, passionately thankful for the astonishing surprises of God. Amen.