

RH Presbyterian

Acts 11:1-18

Rev. Gwen North

Surprise!!

July 23, 2017

My step-mother, Mary, was kayaking by herself in the Puget sound a couple of years back. She was out pretty deep. A woman on the beach started yelling at her. She was waving her arms and making a scene on the beach. Mary thought, oh she must be hurt. Mary headed in to shore. She was a strong paddler and it didn't take very long. When she got in the woman said that there was an Orca jumping out of the water and falling just off the side of her boat. Mary had no idea but she did know that kayakers are at risk of being flipped by Orca whales as they get into deeper waters. She was thankful to be in shallow waters and stayed close to the shore on the way back. This was an unexpected surprise for her as she headed home that beautiful summer day.

When I was 24 years old, I was living in Ketchum/Sun Valley Idaho. VBS was a huge production that I put on each summer. There were over 150 kids that came and it was an intense week for me as I directed it. On Friday when it was over I knew I needed to get away. I headed west and went up to the Sawtooth Mountains: just me and my dog, Ruth.

**Pictures of Ruth (Should scroll through automatically, and keep looping until you click on the next slide)**

My dog Ruth was a great hiker. I brought a sleeping bag, a zip lock bag of dog food, two powerbars, and a water bottle. The hike that I chose in my hiking book was rated “expert.” I didn’t think anything of it as I was in tip top shape. I headed down the trail. The trail turned into bolder climbing. Sometimes I had to carry my dog up the rocks. I saw no one out that day on the trail. Finally, after hours of hiking and weary from my week of Directing VBS I found a lake. A crisp, perfect, clear, shining mountain lake. It was beautiful. I set out my sleeping bag after taking it out of the cinch sack that I was carrying it with. I ate a powerbar and enjoyed the sunset. Soon Ruth and I were off to sleep by the waters edge in the middle of the wilderness. I kept Ruth on a leash to keep her close. The stars were magnificent that night. They shone like bright lights next to the dark mask of the night. At about 2am Ruth went crazy. She was barking like I had rarely ever heard her bark. I called out in a loud strong voice in the darkness to ward off anything. In complete darkness, without a flashlight, I held onto the leash. Thankfully, the loud noise moved on we had no idea about the threat of attack that night. We were unprepared because we had only peaceful expectations going into the night.

The other week driving to Seattle and the 520 was closed

Brooke's Surprise Party

Grant's Present

**So unexpected things happen – both good and not so good.**

-----

Today we look at the concept of surprises in the spiritual realm, and how God works in unexpected ways. So I invite you to grab your Bibles, or a blue pew Bible, and turn to Acts 11:1-18. We'll read the whole thing in at one time this morning. And as we read it, I encourage you to count up all the things that might have been a surprise or seemingly odd to the people in this passage.

**(Acts 11:1-18 here.)**

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him <sup>3</sup> and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

<sup>4</sup> Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. <sup>6</sup> I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. <sup>7</sup> Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

<sup>8</sup>“I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

<sup>9</sup>“The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ <sup>10</sup>This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

<sup>11</sup>“Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. <sup>12</sup>The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. <sup>13</sup>He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. <sup>14</sup>He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

<sup>15</sup>“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup>Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with<sup>[a]</sup> water, but you will be baptized with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>17</sup>So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

<sup>18</sup>When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

**(How many surprise or seemingly odd things did you count?)** I count at least 7 things for the various people in the passage. And every single one of them is a great move of God. The Gentiles received the word of

God; Peter experienced a vision from God; The vision declared that all food is now clean to eat; A voice in the vision patiently reiterates that message when Peter disagrees with what he sees; Three men, following God's leading, unannounced and uninvited show up at the door of the house where he's staying; Peter sees the Spirit of God telling him not to see differences between Jews and Gentiles; and the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles the in much the same way that it did on the Disciples in Acts 2. What? Hello People! Major change here. Clearly, God moves in unexpected ways, and we see a good measure of different ways here.

**As we reflect, it seems that it happens often enough, that you'd think we would begin to expect God to move like this, but so often we are caught off-guard.**

In fact: This is common throughout Scripture, and in our lives, too. God gets His way in our lives! God has an agenda that is not ours! God is oftentimes surprising us and challenging our core intentions and plans. For instance, a couple chapters before this we read of a nasty evil man that was persecuting the church. His name was Saul. But he had a radical encounter with Jesus a blinding light - and Saul was transformed into a follower of Jesus. He later changed his name to Paul, and he went on to start churches and many of his letters to those churches comprise much of the New Testament. That was scary for believers to accept. Their greatest fear became their ally.

Looking at the whole of Scripture we see that God does some awesome things: creation and the unspeakable beauty of the earth. Jesus, the Messiah, came as one of use and redeems us with His death. The life of Jesus was unexpected: people were waiting for a ruler to restore Israel. What they got was a great friend, a miracle worker, a fabulous public speaker, and a message of hope. Jesus healed people with some amazing miracles in spite of the reality that his father was a carpenter. Jesus rose from the grave – the disciples were meeting in a house and were downcast. Then their Savior came back to life. Jesus is, was, and continues to be our Savior today.

We can go back further, too: Noah built a boat inland and waited for rain. Joseph was abandoned and sold by his brothers. He ended up one of the great leaders of Egypt and later saved his family. After infertility, Hannah got pregnant and gave birth to Samuel whom she followed through with her promise and dedicated him to serve in the temple. Israel's escape from Egypt; The sea parting, God fed the people as Manna came, Moses brought water from a rock. I find all this inspiring and surprising! It helps me to put hope in God and see that he has a way through my immediate persecutions, pain, and trials. **We can see that God's plans are much higher and much greater than any of my plans.**

Peter was just as shocked as anyone when God opened his love up to the Gentiles. In fact, his response to the meaning of the vision was simply put in two letters: NO! I imagine that God knew all too well that Peter would do this. He was set in his ways, his tradition, his predictable lifestyle. But God was persistent, and got through to him. The Holy Spirit came to the Gentiles. **People's lives were transformed as people believed.**

Looking back, this is really revolutionary. For the food purity laws given to the Jewish people they were not allowed to eat foods that weren't Kosher. As a result, they couldn't necessarily share food with Gentiles. This was God's way of setting his people apart and keeping them holy. Yet, this didn't work for the calling that Christians were given in Acts 1 to bring the Good News to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This rocked his world.

The good news of Jesus Christ is for the entire world. God backed up the good news with the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter stepped out in faith. In faith, and by the power of God, Peter broke down boundaries and did what he was told to do. God brought many to faith despite the scandal of it all: Jews were eating unclean food with Gentiles. They were now one in the faith, hope, and love of Christ.

## **God's love is truly for all people.**

Something tells me today that God is likely moving in an unexpected way in your life. God will always surprise us and move us in unexpected ways – they may not be the most fun ways. They may include areas or foods that we don't even like. Or, they may be downright amazing. There are so many aspects of my life that I really have to work at. Things that don't come naturally to me that I have to work at. These are ways that I am challenged on a daily basis and have to work hard. There are also many ways that I find my calling to be less than satisfying, boring, or hum drum. Yet, God continues to unfold his perfect work with me.

God has moved in surprising ways here, in children's ministry. For instance, there was a Sunday in the fall of 2014 just after I took the position. I went forward to take the children out of the sanctuary and only my four kids came forward. I felt awkward and embarrassed – it was a bad surprise! I was mortified. The church hired me to lead and no one showed up. On those days early on, I was always hoping to see Amanda Pippel or the Taylor boys on Sundays so that my kids wouldn't be the only ones. It was stressful, embarrassing, and awkward. Yet, I prayed and trusted God. Now, at the time of writing this sermon –



Surprise!!! - I can think of 10 families with kids that have made RH their church home and in many ways have become my dearest friends and community. I am humbled as I reflect upon the pain of my lonely start in Children's ministry and that God has brought community, but God continues to move in good surprising ways.

I am so deeply thankful that God didn't leave us there. God brought beloved servants of God who teach children's ministry and love on kids. God led Charlotte Grant, Jeanne Harshbarger, Janet Harget, and Bud VanderAa to work with and serve beside in those early days to today in my Children's Ministry role; they could have moved on to other things. I am so thankful for them and the many more that God has brought alongside this ministry since then. I could gush over them as I celebrate God's surprising goodness.

Looking outside of our local church we see that there are people in our world that are hard for us to reach. There are people who are geographically inconvenient – outside of our Eastside bubble. I recently was impressed with Lifewater. Lifewater brings self-sustaining wells to far-flung communities that don't have clean drinking water. By “self-sustaining” I mean that when the wells break, the locals will be able to fix them, because all the parts for the wells come from inside their country. Lifewater also brings the Gospel and basic sanitation teaching.

This inspires me. **What inspires you, perhaps surprisingly, to make a difference in the world for the cause of Christ?**

There are people who scare us. There are people that we can't relate to and don't interest us. Yet, as we listen to the heart of God we can be transformed out of our comfortable living to exciting living. Like the crazy wake up call that Ruth and I got beside the lake when a wild beast paid us a visit or when Mary kayaked with the Orca. **Our lives can get awakened. We can serve with new energy and vision.**

Keep an open heart to God, friends! Maybe God will even surprise you and remove barriers or rules that you heartily follow to serve those people. Like Peter:

May our lives draw us to eat with those whom Christ leads us to eat with;

May our lives lead us to reach out to people who are different from us;

May our faith sustain us as we step out with fear and trembling;

May we be willing to fail, be embarrassed, step out, break from our friends – if needed - and live recklessly before the Lord as He leads us in surprising ways! Let's Pray!

---