

FINDING GOD IN LIFE'S SURPRISES (MT 13:31-33, 44-49a)
Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges, July 29, 2008, SJOC

Surprise! It was my 15th birthday. I was walking down the stairs to our basement when I heard the word, “Surprise!” I was embarrassed, delighted and humbled that my mom and dad would do this for me, plan a surprise party for my birthday with my six best friends. How had they managed to coordinate everything without my knowing? The friends had made it into the house without my knowing. There was all the food, the cake, streamers and decorations. Either I was very naïve or my parents were very clever.

Fast forward six years. I’m walking down those same stairs. I turn on the lights, “Surprise!” How could I have fallen for it again? It’s my 21st birthday. Again I missed all the signs, did not spot one detail. Phone calls must have been made, invitations sent, my friends must have talked and coordinated how to get there without my knowing.

Nineteen years later, I’m meeting my family at a restaurant to celebrate my nephew’s seventh birthday. I’m carrying two big boxes wrapped in kid’s paper; my husband follows with another package. The hostess takes us into the room where we are to meet my family...”Surprise!” Number three!!! There stand my in-laws from Indiana, my friends from Chicago and the suburbs, and of course my parents and Mike with huge smiles on their faces. My father says, “We got you again!” It’s the celebration of 40th birthday—masterfully planned once again.

Needless to say, I have learned that life is full of surprises. Things often happen when we least expect them. We never know what lies right around the corner. Do you remember the first time you learned this lesson in life—the lesson of surprise???

When I was in second grade, my teacher made a cake, the ugliest cake I have ever seen. The frosting was muddy green and brown, the cake was odd shaped and the frosting was uneven and clumpy. That cake looked awful and unappetizing. All of us students waited as my teacher cut the cake, giving us each a piece. We dreaded the thought of having to bite into it, but guess what happened when we did? It was

delicious! Our teacher taught us two important lessons. The first, don't judge a book by its cover. Things and people are often not as they appear. The second was the lesson of surprise—life is full of surprises!

Our readings today confirm that not only is life full of surprises, but God is as well! In 1 Kings, God appears to Solomon in a dream, telling him to ask for whatever he desires. Now the first surprise could be Solomon's request. It's not for riches or power or long life, but wisdom. How many of us would ask for that? But God's response is more surprising...God gives Solomon not only what he has asked, but the other things as well. God gives him more than he expected.

Our gospel reading from MT offers more amazement. A mustard seed, claimed to be the smallest on earth, grows into the greatest of bushes. It defeats all odds and grows abundantly into a tree, putting forth branches that serve as the foundation for nests or homes for the birds of the air. And if you are not a gardener and cannot relate to this parable, Jesus offers another. There is the example of yeast, when mixed with flour it expands, rising into something that feeds.

Both the mustard seed and the yeast illustrate same point: small beginnings of Kingdom can grow and spread, providing a safe home, food & hope for God's creatures. In this lesson again, God says don't judge something based on how it appears. The smallest seed can become the greatest shrub, a little yeast can rise into a whole lot of nourishing bread, and the ugliest cake can be the most delicious. God's order is not ours. It's miraculous and mysterious all at the same time! And we hear about the element of surprise. We ought to be prepared for God's surprises. We even ought to expect them by now.

Now this whole sermon could play it safe and stick with the examples we are given in our gospel today, but I think the packaging of the surprises in our lives is an important discussion. In our gospel Jesus talks about surprises that come in welcomed packages—someone finds a buried treasure, a merchant finds a valuable pearl, a fisherman has a great catch. Those surprises are happy ones, ones any of us

would love to receive. With a small taste of those kinds of surprises, we'd be much more likely to give up everything for the Kingdom.

But what about surprises that are not so wonderful? What about the times in life when instead of gaining something we experience a loss? We lose our job, a marriage goes south, a parent or child dies, a friend gets sick...what about those kind surprises? Sometimes with such surprises we discover we are actually better off after the change, but other times...? We are not so sure. For example, recently a parishioner asked me about suffering. Why do we have to suffer—why do we have to experience the surprise of drawn out, unwanted circumstances? How do we remember the Kingdom at those times?

Our first help comes in a detail in first two parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. If you read these carefully, you will notice that both involve some degree of work. The Kingdom does not just grow on its own. Someone has to plant and cultivate the seed God gives us. Someone has to work the dough in order for it to rise. Anyone who has ever farmed or baked knows it takes some muscle. The expansion of Kingdom does not just happen on its own. It takes work and that work needs to be done in part by you and me.

More help comes from Paul in our reading from Romans. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray.” This is especially true in tough times, when surprises come in unwelcomed packages. Paul reminds us that we are not alone in doing the work. The moment we get tired, God’s Spirit is right there by our side helping us along. If we lose the words or do not know how to pray, God does our praying in and for us.

Paul also says that nothing can get between us and God’s love for us—no unwanted situation, no hardship, no disaster, no suffering is that great. And all things work together for good for those who love God. Believing this takes trust. Although we cannot understand it at the present time, we must trust that God will reign supreme in the end.

Finally, I think one big help comes to us in the two parables about the pearl digger and the treasure hunter. What did those two do? They looked for the treasure. Particularly when times are tough, we need to look for God's grace in our world. Search for the good, for the beautiful things in life; put your hopes on God and heaven.

When I think of God masterfully planning the details of our lives, I think back to my own parents. I remember their faces each time they caught me off guard with a surprise and delighted in my response. I wonder if God is grinning at us as well, exclaiming, "You thought you had it all figured out! Well, surprise!"

We never know what will happen next. Do not judge things on how they appear today. Hang tough, have faith, trust and all will be well.