

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

“The Journey Is...Surprising”

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Genesis 12:1-6; 17:1-8;15-22

There is a story circulating about the patient who went to his physician complaining of pain in several places. The doctor asked him to indicate where it hurt. He pointed first to his leg, then to his back, then to his side, finally to his head. "Every time I press on these places, it hurts." After a careful examination, the physician diagnosed his problem: "Here is why you have pain when you touch all of those places—you have a broken finger."

Our theme today is Surprise, and I want to invite you to consider some of the biggest surprises of your life. There are pleasant surprises—you fall in love, make a new friend, get an unexpected promotion or raise or gift, or learn that you have really made a difference in someone else's life.

And then there are unpleasant surprises—a test result reveals a tumor, an accident changes your life forever, a stunning disappointment, rejection, betrayal knocks the wind out of you. Surprises can be positive or negative.

I was trying to think about some of the biggest surprises I have had in my lifetime, and there have been many, like the surprise birthday party my mother and husband threw for me when I turned 40 (seems like such a long, long time ago now). But I have to say that among the biggest of my surprises was the fact that I became a minister. When I felt myself being called to this, I resisted it mightily. It was not what I thought would ever happen to me. Although my mother was a minister, and she made it look easy, that was not what I wanted to be doing with my life at all. I knew that my mother got calls in the middle of the night, she was always going to meetings, and she had to work weekends. It didn't appeal to me, so it was a complete surprise to feel myself being drawn in this direction, even called by God. I resisted it for as long as I could.

And if it was a surprise to me, it was really a surprise to the people I knew in High School. Not in a million years would any of them have guessed that I, of all people, was headed for the ministry. In fact, at the 25th High School reunion of the John F. Kennedy graduating class of 1975, I was presented with a special award. The award was the “Most Unlikely Career Imaginable” based upon the person I was in High School.

Speaking of High School, the year I graduated a book was published entitled, What Really Happened To The Class of '65? It was written by two guys who graduated from South Palisades High School in Southern California. They went to their first class reunion in 1975 and were absolutely shocked to see what a decade had done to their classmates. The person everyone assumed most likely to succeed

was far from successful; in fact he was a mess. Their class president and Homecoming Queen had aged 25 years instead of 10 and she was not at all confident or happy. The star athlete had gotten involved with drugs and was nothing like the popular guy he had been a decade earlier. It was painful to see these people they had envied and admired and what had happened to them.

But the other surprise of course was the people who were complete nerds in High School—who were doing remarkably well. Some of the most awkward shy and unpopular people were highly successful. One was a Hollywood screenwriter, acting on Broadway, even though she had not been in one play in High School. Others had blossomed and were now confident, outgoing and happy.

We could all share stories just like theirs, stories of how people did not turn out the way we might have guessed, but I wish those guys had written another book in 1985 and another in 1995 and yet another in 2005. Because it would be interesting to see what other surprises life had in store for their classmates. Even though someone was a particular way 10 years later, that does not mean they would be that way in another 10 years. What matters is never who we were in the short run, but who we are in the long run. What counts is not who we are in just one season of our lives, but who we are in the entirety of our lives. It's not just who we are at 22, but who we are at 62, 82. Because life is a journey and it takes many twists and turns in different seasons of our lives.

Abraham had the surprise of his life when God called him at the age of 75. In his golden years he was asked by God to leave all that was safe and familiar to chase an unknown future. This in itself is surprising, but what God did with Abraham is even more so. God invited him to leave his country, family, home and become the father to an entire race of people. Then, at the age of 99, God says to Abraham, "I will make a covenant with you and give you a huge family." He would become known as the father of the Hebrew people, an entire race, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. To this very day, all three monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all trace their roots to Abraham. And the shocking thing is that all of this happened at a time when it appeared that his life was pretty much over, his best years were behind him and not ahead of him.

His journey was surprising and filled with twists and turns that were not anticipated. Genesis 12 tells us that Abraham set off on this trip at the age of 75 going to various sites in Caanan, to a land that God would show him. He had no idea where he was going.

What kind of an itinerary is that? Leave the security and familiarity of home and hearth, of family and possession, and don't concern yourself with where you're going. You'll find out in due time. And it's not that the biblical narrator in Genesis simply left the destination detail out of the story; Abraham really was not told. The New Testament writer of Hebrews noticed that, because, centuries later, that writer referred back to this story as an example of faith, by saying: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, having no idea where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8)

He gets a surprising call from God and he hit the road, so his journey was about leaving **not** arriving. The trip was also about an experience, **not** a destination.

We really have no idea what he felt or thought about this surprising call from God. We can speculate, of course, about what might have gone through his mind. Possibly one of Abraham's concerns was how God was going to bring a great nation from him when he hadn't been successful in producing even a single child. And his wife Sarah was long past the childbearing years. He might have also worried about how he was going to get by hitting the road at age 75, an age when most sensible people slow down and stay put.

So we can speculate about what he may have thought and felt, but the biblical narrator wastes no time doing that. Instead, the story moves forward with a straightforward statement: "So Abraham went" We can only imagine what was in his head and heart as he and Sarah set off. He went to where he was called, and along the way he transforms this journey into a sacred journey. He has a way of sacramentalizing the places he goes. The places to which God leads Abraham are not spiritually significant in themselves, but they become that way after his arrival.

God led Abraham to the land of Canaan, to several distinct locations. Following God's leading; Abraham and his family worked their way from north to south through Canaan, sojourning successively in various places.

The first was Shechem (Genesis 12:6). There God again spoke to Abraham, saying, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he responded by building an altar to God.

Next, he moved to Bethel (Genesis 12:8), and there, apparently God did not speak to Abraham at first, so he built an altar anyway, acting in faith. He initiated the worship of God at that spot. After some other journeying in the region, Abraham returned to this location near Bethel. It was there that a dispute arose between some sheep herders and those of his nephew Lot over grazing land and water usage. To resolve the conflict, Abraham graciously allowed Lot to choose whatever land he wanted. Lot chose the most fertile land, and Abraham accepted the less desirable land for himself. Then he moved to Hebron, where again he built an altar to God.

Finally, Abraham arrived at Beer-sheba, where, after a peaceful resolution of a dispute between Abraham and the local ruler over a well he had dug, Abraham marked the agreement by planting a tree and calling God by a new name. In English it's translated as "the Everlasting God," and this is the first occurrence of that name for God in the Bible. The point is that his faithfulness to God's call eventually led him to a much greater understanding of God.

This surprising journey was made sacred because of the following features:

- First, Abram headed out in response to what he perceived as a call from God. He went. He obeyed the call. He put his faith into action, which is the true test of any faith.
- Second, when Abram arrived at his destination, he listened for what God wanted him to do there. He built the altar because he became aware that God was speaking to him.
- Third, he "invoked" the name of God, seeking God's blessing. That is, he did what he could to make the place where he was God's place.
- Fourth, he worked as a peacemaker. In the conflict with Lot, he put his own desires last.
- Fifth, he grew in his own understanding of God because he obeyed and followed where God wanted him to go.

Those five criteria — obedience, listening, worshiping, peacemaking and being

open to the leading of God — made Abraham's journey sacred and can do the same for us. That's important because God calls us to trust without seeing, to leave our comfort zones and go places where we might feel completely lost. God calls us to situations and places that scare us and test us. And God sometimes calls us to carry crosses, to bear burdens that are heavy indeed.

So what surprises has God presented to you during your life? What crosses and what miracles? Where has God made a way in your life when there seemed to be no way? How has God given you the strength to carry on, and the courage to do that thing you thought you could never do?

At one time or another we will all find ourselves on a surprising journey, some of them will take place without us ever leaving home. Journeys of discovery, change, and growth where we learn that faith is not about knowledge, but about trust, life is not about having the answers, but seeking the questions, it is not about managing our own destiny, but losing control of our destiny.

As we continue on these journeys, may we, like Abraham respond in faith by listening, worshiping, making peace with others and always keeping our hearts and minds open to the mysterious ways of God. Thanks Be To God.