

There is an awful lot going on in today's Gospel. A hefty six paragraphs long, it contains at least four stories in one. First, we have Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. We also hear of Jesus' interaction with his disciples, which in itself contains another story in the parable of the harvest and the sower and the reaper. Then we have the Samaritan woman's testimony to the people of Sychar. And finally, John tells us of the Samaritans two-day engagement with Jesus, where many come to believe "that this is truly the Savior of the world."

When preaching to a reading this lengthy and layered, I typically like to focus on one key thing—often sparked by an image or a metaphor or a particular bit of wisdom from Jesus. But today, I'm struck by something broader. I'm struck by the many and myriad surprises we encounter this morning.

Actually, the surprises start not with our Gospel but with the Old Testament passage, where Exodus delivers a few notable surprises. The Israelites, saved from bondage in Egypt, unexpectedly find themselves wandering through the desert with no water. They ask Moses, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" And Moses is amazed that these people, so recently freed by God's grace, dare to quarrel with him and test the Lord.

And then we move to the Epistle, where Paul shares a few revelations himself. For instance, that "...while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." That "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." What an astonishing departure from the quid pro quo relationships of the world, where we must constantly prove ourselves strong enough, attractive enough, smart enough—that we must be "good enough" in

someone's book to earn and keep their love. How radically surprising Paul's assertion that we need do nothing to earn or keep God's love, a "love...poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

And then finally we arrive at the Gospel, to hear of the ground-breaking encounter by the well. A meeting that starts with Jesus, a Jew, asking a Samaritan woman for a drink. Why is this so surprising? Well, not only do Jews and Samaritans want nothing to do with each other, but this woman is probably an outsider in her own community, someone who chose to draw water alone at noon, in the heat of the scorching sun, rather than with the other women in the morning or evening. She's a woman, she's a Samaritan, and she's likely someone on the margins. Three reasons why Jesus should not bother to speak to her.

And yet, not only does he speak, but he tells her shockingly personal, private things about herself. Things he should not know, but somehow does. And the disciples, who must be stunned when they witness this encounter, for some reason stay mute about it. Not one of them says, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" It's not like they've never questioned Jesus before or called him out for crossing cultural boundaries and norms. Yet, in this encounter, they choose silence.

Of course, the woman too is surprised: by the fact that Jesus speaks to her, that he asks her for a drink, and especially that he knows such private details about her life. And from that place of amazement, she goes to tell the Samaritans in the city, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" In response, they leave the city to find Jesus and discover for themselves. And the Samaritans spend time with Jesus, and many come to believe.

I remember the moment I first believed. Some of you have heard some version of the story of my conversion to Christianity. You may recall that after my baptism as an infant in the Catholic Church, I journeyed through a childhood and adolescence alternating between agnosticism and atheism, often quite vocal about how unlikely the existence of God. Until at the age of 24, I experienced what many call a “born-again” moment. Seated in a small non-denominational church housed in a strip mall in Laurel, I clearly heard God’s voice speak to me, I felt the Holy Spirit descend upon me—and I believed.

Granted, there’s a bit more to the story that the Cliff Notes I just shared. But the point I want to make is that when I walked out of that church into the bright sunlight of that Sunday, I felt much like I imagine the Samaritan woman at the well might have. I understood that God intimately knew the sin and brokenness in me, and I knew he’d extended to me his saving grace and unearned love.

From that moment of belief, I never would’ve imagined the journey I’ve embarked on—through leaving that particular church, finding and experiencing God’s love in other faith communities, wandering parched through several deserts along the way, and landing in the Episcopal Church, where I found my call as a deacon. What surprising turns life can take when we let God take charge of the voyage.

When is the last time you’ve been surprised? A better question: When is the last time you allowed yourself to be surprised by the grace of God?

At our first Lenten supper a few weeks ago, our own Assistant Bishop Ihloff spoke to Christians’ role as ambassadors for peace. He made the point that of the 50% of people who call themselves “nones,” meaning not affiliated with any religion, their best chance of finding God is through us. While not impossible,

it's unlikely they'll pick up a Bible or wander into church on their own. So how will they encounter Christ? Through you and me.

Bishop Ihloff shared the story of how he'd grown up in a fundamentalist Baptist tradition, experiencing and rebelling against an angry and judgmental God. He recalled that as a teenager, he'd been something of a "juvenile delinquent"—his words, not mine—and his exasperated parents sent him one summer to a Christian youth camp. There, he met people who, with every wall he erected and every ill behavior he manifested, showed him nothing but acceptance and love. There, he found himself surprised. And it transformed his life.

Our trek toward Holy Week calls us to a discovery of surprise and wonder. Wonder at God's unconditional love, no matter our sinful and wayward ways. Wonder at how God forgives us time and again. Wonder at God's grace abounding in others.

It's a wonder that the world does its best to suffocate: through distractions like social media, through our addictions to success and money and status, through our obsessions with fame and celebrity, through divisions between class, race, culture, and political ideology, through the darkness of injustice and violence and hatred. Even through our familiar everyday routines and rituals, in work and school and family and social life, where we often mindlessly repeat the same drills day after day. Indeed, there is much in this world to drown out surprise and wonder.

Lent offers us an opportunity to be surprised: by what we find in ourselves, by the ways we need to repent and turn back to God, and by the endless and

eternal grace God offers. Like the woman at the well, we are called to surrender to the surprise of that grace, and to spread that wonder to others—to share the living waters Jesus speaks to when he tells the Samaritan woman, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” But to be so transformed, we must recognize our thirst, accept those living waters, and allow ourselves to see what God wants us to see.

As early Church reformer St. Teresa of Avila said, “We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can – namely, surrender our will and fulfill God’s will in us. Anything else must be a hindrance to the soul which the Lord has brought to this state...And this is...acquired...by a clear perception of the truth, which comprehends in one moment...that we are nothing, and that God is infinitely great.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, how can we comprehend such a thing if our minds are continually distracted? Like the Israelites roaming through the desert of Sinai, again and again we get caught up in our own needs and desires, prone to forget God’s saving love.

But in Lent, we can engage in different disciplines not to see how long we can go without chocolate or alcohol or Netflix, but to empty ourselves of those things that muddy our minds, to seek the sacred—whether in nature or in moments of silence or in the sanctuary of solitude or in interaction with others—so we may more clearly see and know our Savior and Redeemer.

In our journey to the foot of the cross, we comprehend that we are nothing, and that God is infinitely great. It’s a moment we know but tend to forget. As we

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<sup>1</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, in *The Complete Works St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume 2.

continue our pilgrimage toward Holy Week, I pray we find ways to intentionally seek and hold on to those surprising and sacred moments—in creation, in connection, in contemplation, in whatever ways work for each of us—as together we stand justified by faith, having peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and boasting in our hope of sharing God’s glory.