

“Surprise!”

Genesis 18:1-15
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Abraham and Sarah had settled into a nice, quiet routine. In what we might now call their retirement years, they like the predictability of each day. Abraham keeps a few goats out in the pasture. Sarah tends a small garden. Their life has taken on a sedentary nature. Their Social Security check arrives on the last day of the month; the morning paper arrives by sun-up; the postal worker brings the mail around 10:00 a.m. They make tea at 4:00 in the afternoon. Predictability defines their existence.

That, of course, is when the surprise breaks in! Visitors, who turn out to be angels in disguise, stop by for a friendly visit. No doubt, they bring news from across the river, stories from other villages. But mostly they have come to make a surprise announcement. Sarah is going to have a baby! This news generates considerable nervous laughter! Disbelief is her first reaction. This surprise announcement is not immediately embraced. After all, she has been through menopause. She is looking at the sunset years of her life. Surprise! When the angels return in the spring, she'll be changing diapers!

By the time the angels head off down the road, Sarah is warming up to the whole idea. I picture her sitting in a rocking chair, knitting some blue booties and reflecting on her life journey. She sees that this is not the first time God has surprised her; not the first time God has interrupted her established routine. She sees by hindsight that this is usually how God works, through the element of surprise! Just when things seem to be going along ever so smoothly; surprise! God has a new idea, a new calling, a new expectation.

At times, I feel our work as disciples of Christ is to be open to the surprises, to be open to the visitation of angels, to be open to something new God has in mind for us. Whether we are Sarah's age and looking for the security that comes with a regular pension, or whether we are in our mid-twenties and completing our first masters degree; I pray we will all have an openness to the surprising ways God breaks into our lives.

I think of Jimmy Carter's mother who joined the Peace Corps late in life. She reminds me so much of Sarah. I picture Lillian Carter parked in front of her television watching a soap opera, maybe knitting a sweater, when an advertisement for the Peace Corps interrupts the program: "The hardest job you'll ever love." She hears these words and can't get them out of her head. The words become a calling she cannot deny. At age 68, she signs up and heads to India. Call it what you will, I call it a 'God Surprise.'

I think of Hunter Kramer, finishing up at Tulane University, tending bar in a local pub, and hoping there's more to life than making a good margarita. It occurs to him he MIGHT teach English in Africa. A phone call and an e-mail communication, and he is on a plane bound for Lilongwe. Surprise! He teaches the one term to which he has committed and is moved to stay another year. Returning home, he is now pursuing an advanced degree in International Development. Call it what you will. I call it a "God Surprise."

Sarah's God Surprise caused her to burst out laughing. Who? Me? Have a baby? Ha, ha, ha! This is usually the human response when God breaks in with a new vision. Me? Teach in the church school on Sunday mornings this coming Fall? Me? Lead a mission trip to the Heifer Farm? Me? Go to seminary? Me? Join the Joyful Noise Band? Me? Initiate a men's retreat? Ha ha! You've got to be kidding!! You're joking, right?

What I believe is that God doesn't call us into a discipleship of couch potato sitting. God calls us into a discipleship of active engagement. God interrupts our comfortable complacency, our predictable circumstances. God sends angels into our midst. Angels plant seeds for ministry and mission. Angels make little announcements which we hear with the ears of our hearts.

Here's how these angelic announcements may sound:

+Brian and Bob, use your talent to build handicap ramps on Cheyenne River Reservation. It will cost you some gas money to get there, but the rewards are heavenly.

+Dana, use your passion to help teach the Confirmation class. It will put a kink into your Wednesday evenings, but the payoff is worth more than gold.

+Sandy, use your knack with words to generate interest in poetry. It will cost you many Sunday afternoons, but the sound of rhyming words will make your heart sing.

+Cheryl, bring a welcome basket to the home of every new resident in Glastonbury. It will be inconvenient at times, but the joy will be immeasurable.

In the Genesis story, Sarah does become pregnant. And she does have a baby boy the following spring. She names him Isaac which means 'child of laughter.' One of Sarah's roles in the Bible is to let the world know that God works in surprising ways, that God surprises us when we least expect a surprise, when, perhaps we are most resistant to a surprise. I know that many people really do not like surprises; don't want to be surprised on their birthdays; don't want to open the front door and have neighbors leap from behind curtains yelling, "Surprise! Happy Birthday!" But, I have to tell you: this is how God often operates. So, fasten your seatbelts. To be a disciple of Christ is to be ready for a surprise! In the greatest of hope, Amen.

