

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Surprising Encounters"
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(Lent 2)

Life is full of surprising encounters with other people. You may see me at the convenience store buying milk or another cold beverage. I may see you at the mall or the airport. It's nice to run into people we know, to be in small enough of a community that we actually can run into each other, but large enough of a community that it's still a surprise.

There have been times where someone has not recognized me outside of my clergy outfit or robes. There have been times when I have not recognized others who I know and have even visited, but for whatever reason did not recognize...perhaps a change of facial hair, or hair color or simply my not noticing. Someone not from this congregation chastised me in the Fall because I failed to wave back while I was driving in the car. Now you know, I try to look at other drivers, but I don't always. Some people don't ever look at other drivers. But that's another story.

Knowing God means you're in for surprising encounters with God. That was true for Abraham. He was comfortable in his own culture, family and surroundings in which he lived. God called him away from that to somewhere new. And he went. Lot, his nephew, went with him. When we read this story, we don't often realize how radical and life changing that is. Abraham went away from everything that was familiar to him, and chose to trust God for the whole future, employment, finances, relationships, you name it and Abraham trusted God for it. That's the point Paul is making when he refers to the fact that Abraham was not commended by God because he kept the Law or knew the Scriptures, because they hadn't appeared yet. He was commended for his faith, that is, for his trusting God for every aspect of his future.

And we are encouraged today to do the same. Trust God with your future. Trust God with today. Trust God with your relationships. Trust God with your career path. Trust God for your education. Trust God for your life long mate. Trust God.

Many of us have moved here to Newfoundland simply by trusting God. We didn't know how long we would be here. And some of us who thought we would stay a year or two are still here after decades.

Some of us have made a lifestyle of trusting God for where we will live. I trusted God for that when I moved to Canada from California in 1980. I didn't even learn about Canadian geography in school, I learned it while I was here. I had no idea what the weather was going to be. And to be honest, I didn't care about what the weather was going to be, because I was trusting God. Can you imagine Abraham saying to God, but Lord, I've heard the weather isn't very nice north of here. Are you sure I'm supposed to leave this nice weather here? No, he just went.

And we went to different provinces of Canada in 1983, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1995, 2002, and last year, believing that God is leading. By the way, this doesn't include smaller local moves. So you could say that we're a bit nomadic, or that we really are trusting God for our future. Coming here and staying here or leaving is the same. And maybe you're wondering about where you should be or where you should go. Trust the Lord for the details. Honor God with the decision, and He will guide you. It's not about history alone, it is about trusting God now.

That's what the Psalmist was doing as well. In fact, the song sung in 121 is a litany of promises. When I look up to God with my situation, like when I look up at the mountains or the hills or Cabot Tower, I trust Him for my well being. He sings that the Creator is trustworthy. The Creator will give me sure footing in what I believe, will keep me awake and aware in a spiritually confusing and sleepy time in history. God won't abandon me, on the contrary, the Lord's protection is promised to me. What kind of protection? He will provide protection from the weather, protection from deeply being burned by the sunshine or by people. He will provide protection from the moon, from the mental disorders and craziness within our culture that tears us away from our foundation in God through Jesus Christ. He will keep me from being destroyed by evil, and help me pass every test that comes my way. He will protect me from eternal death and from all kinds of hazards on the road and at home. In many surprising ways, God will protect me. Can you list the ways God has protected you throughout the seasons of your life? Maybe you should make this a Lenten project. Take Psalm 121 and make it yours. How have God's promises come true in your life? Write down in your journal how God's promises have been made real in your life. Or, you

could make it an intercession, asking God for His promises to come through in any area in which you are currently struggling.

Abraham was surprised by God. Not only in the call away to the unfamiliar, but also in vastness of the promise given to him. This married but childless man was given the promise of becoming a great nation. And more than that, becoming someone through whom every nation on earth would be blessed. That is a huge promise. And did you notice in the text that Abram was 75. He was a senior citizen when he responded to God's call and promise. Don't write yourself off by your age. God used this senior citizen to bless the whole world. He might do the same with you, if you are willing.

What are the promises God has made to you? Is there something huge that God has promised you that you have seen fulfilled? Have you listened for his promises specifically to you? If so, and you have heard God's promise(s) to you, please place it gently in your treasure box of life. Keep it there, but bring it out often and worship the Lord with this treasure.

In the Gospel reading today, we heard about another surprise encounter with God. This one happened to be at night with a man named Nicodemus. We'll call him Nick. Nick was a Pharisee, which contrary to our thoughts today about it meaning a hypocritical, self-righteous person, meant that he was well educated in the Scriptures. It was said that not only did a Pharisee memorize the whole Bible, but could take a pin and pierce the scroll on which the Bible was written and tell you every letter the pin would go through. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures, but they were missing the Messiah, even though they had lots of religious knowledge. So Nick comes to Jesus, and Jesus knows that Nick is a member of the equivalent of the Supreme Court of Israel of the day. Perhaps this is why Nick is coming at night to have a meeting, because it is less noticed or more confidential, we don't know. But Nick comes and encourages Jesus with the statement that Jesus must be from God because of the signs, the miracles he performs.

Jesus answers this with something off the subject that Nick raised, but right to the point. He says you can't understand God's ways or kingdom unless you've been born a second time, or born from above. You need a complete fresh start with God to know God and God's ways. It's as important as a rebirth, that is, being born again. Now we here this phrase "born again" today and we think of right wing Christians. But this is simply a way that Jesus is teaching that everyone who wants to understand God, can't

understand God, until he or she comes into a brand new relationship with God which as important as another birth, this one being a spiritual birth, a spiritual life, as opposed to the first one which was a physical birth. This Supreme Court judge basically answers the Lord with this response, "Huh? You mean I'm supposed to climb back into Mom and be born a second time? You're crazy."

And so many of us say, "Huh?" You cannot understand God until you have received a new relationship with God's Son, Jesus. And you can't do that until the wind of God blows in your direction.

Now Newfoundlanders understand wind, if anyone on the planet understands it. You know that you don't know where the wind is coming from next. You can see the effects but you can't be in charge of it. I bought a propane barbecue this last summer and a black flocked vinyl cover for it. I didn't bungie the cover done to the unit well enough. Now just a few months later it is torn to shreds. That's how strong the wind is. You can feel the effects of the wind on you, but you can't manage it. So the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit can teach you about Jesus being the interpretive key to spiritual life, but otherwise all this is nonsense.

Everything here is nonsense without the Holy Spirit teaching you that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus is also the Healer, just as the bronze serpent was lifted up in Numbers 21, so Jesus says this serpent was symbolically pointing forward to the Suffering Servant who heals, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, and that Servant is Jesus.

And Jesus reveals that this is not just a private thing between him and Nick. This plan is for the whole world, every culture, every nation. Recite John 3:16-17.

Without this relationship to Jesus, church is nonsense. Without a commitment to Christ, there is no life to celebrate.

The celebration of Lent was recorded in the fourth century at the Council of Nicea (325), so it has been going on a long time. It is a period of fasting so that we can examine ourselves in the midst of longing for a food, or an activity that we have given up in order to reflect on our relationship with God. It is never meant to be just a diet or something to brag about, or just a religious thing. It is meant to lead us to examine our relationship with

Christ, so that when the pang for the sweet or the TV or whatever it is comes, then we can trust Jesus to manage not only that hunger, but also all our lusts and longings.

The Lenten preparation for Easter leads us to surprising encounters with God. The Holy Spirit directs us, falls upon us, and influences us as we open ourselves to that Spirit's guidance and care. So Lent is not mainly about how well you can keep a promise or not keep a promise to abstain from a food or activity, because then it would only be an exercise in shaming or pride. Rather it is an exercise for finding again our life and longing in Jesus' hands.

So please make sure your self-denial continues to be a means to meet with Jesus at night as Nick did, or during the day or anytime at all. The desert of testing becomes the place of discerning our true dependence upon God for spiritual life and direction. Hear again the promise of God for your protection and care, as the psalmist sings Psalm 121 in your ear.

Let us pray.