

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent: Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Well, folks, here we are, the Second Sunday in Lent. By now, I suspect, if you're anything like me, you've had some hiccups in your Lenten disciplines, but you're still sticking with 'em. By now, I suspect, if you're anything like me, you're trucking along, knowing that the beauty and grace of Easter is creeping ever closer, and there's a healthy degree of hunkering down to get ready for that coming Holy Week storm. And, by now, I suspect, if you're anything like me, you're wondering just exactly how we got here. I mean, seriously, it's like Lent just appeared. Poof, and we're rolling down the hill with Jerusalem coming up fast.

I suppose that question, "how did we get here?" could be about a few different things. How did we get here, as in, today, this morning. Through all the things we've endured over the past week, how'd we find those reserves to land us here. Or how'd we get here, as in St. Thomas' in Hamilton, how'd we get here in the first place, years or weeks or days ago? How did we end up being church people when the world has so many other things to offer on a Sunday morning, not the least of which involves a cozy bed and a snooze-button alarm or, better yet, no alarm at all! And there's another level, still. How'd we get here, as in in this world, how'd we get to now, a time when it seems like the wheels are coming off with one bizarre turn of a year followed by another.

How'd we get here? That's a very Lenten question, and I'm glad you asked it. See, we've each gotten to here and to now by very different paths. There's enough along the way to connect us, but we've each got stories to tell. There's probably joy in those stories. There's probably anger and sadness, quiet stretches punctuated by excitement, sometimes the kind you love, sometimes the kind you'd rather not see again. There might be regret or betrayal, but certainly there's hurt. And, no question, there are mistakes. Looking back, finding the answer, or at least looking for the answer, that's part of our work. Reliving and reimagining and reconciling. How'd we get here? And why didn't we end up somewhere else? Truth is, we don't always get say in all that. Sometimes we got here because of someone else.

I know those stories of ours aren't always good or easy things to relive. But I also know they aren't always hard. Like everything, they're a jumbled up reality of life, good and hard and sad and joyful all at once. And it's surprising how even the simplest story has complexity to it, human actors playing complex roles in complex settings in a complex system of a world. It's no wonder there are surprises along the way, but sure enough, surprises pop in. I'm sure Abraham was surprised when God told the old man that he'd soon have kids and lots of 'em. His wife Sarah certainly was surprised. She got a good belly laugh out of the news, and her joy spread into the nations. When we look back at the big picture of our story, that's the idea over and over. God surprises us, pops in when we least expect it, when we're comfortable or complacent or just can't take it anymore--we don't know when--God pops in. We follow the God of Surprises.

God has surprised me in more ways than I can remember, at least more than I can remember all at once. But one of my favorite times came when I was living in Thailand. Early on in my stay, I went to visit this Buddhist monastery in the woods. The family I was living with at the time wanted me to see this beautiful place, and as we pulled up, and I hopped out of the back of the pickup, a little kid ran up to see who we were. Now, my experience with little kids there went one of two ways. Either they'd stop in their tracks and stare at me for a half-second before running up to investigate, or they'd stop in their tracks and stare at me for a half-second before running away. This kid ran away.

I didn't really think anything of it, not until he came running back to where I was, followed in short order by a monk in those bright orange, saffron robes. He was a tall man, probably in his mid-fifties, a caucasian guy from Australia. And he was on a walking pilgrimage that began down in Singapore and would

eventually end in Nepal. Y'all, that's a long way. It just so happened that he'd arrived at that monastery tucked into that forest earlier that day, and he would only be there for that one night before continuing on--the same day I just so happened to find my way there. This was a well-timed surprise. I'd been living in another monastery and, while my Thai was getting better, there were still a lot of things that slipped by my understanding, maybe thundered by, if I'm being honest. I was curious about the life of a monk, but there was too much I couldn't get through with my limited language skills, so this Australian monk was a godsend. We sat on the ground and talked for several hours before my Thai family, who had been waiting very patiently, finally corralled me into the pickup.

That was cool enough, and had the story ended there, I'm sure I would still treasure those hours spent with him in the sticky Thai heat. But it doesn't end there. At the end of my stay, as my departure date crept ever closer, I decided to do a sort of Greatest Hits Tour of places that had meant something to me. I went to temples and restaurants and random spots on the side of the road, all those places where something big had happened, marking the surprises and cementing the memories. So, of course I had to go back to that temple.

We pulled up in that same pickup, and I hopped out with the same clumsy, flip-flopped feet. That same kid ran up to see who had just arrived, saw me, stopped in his tracks and stared for a second before running away. Y'all can probably see where this is going, but I didn't. I was just kind of tickled at how predictable that kid's welcome had become. But sure enough, a few minutes later, he ran back up to me and pointed to that same Australian monk walking a few paces behind, same saffron robes, same worn out feet, same weird surprise, only this time with a little more delight in the improbability of it all. He had made it all the way to Nepal, spent some time there praying, and then decided to turn around and go home, walking all the way back to his starting point in Singapore and, you guessed it, stopping in that temple for just one night, arriving the same and only day I decided to go back. True to form, we talked about the same things in different ways for hours.

Those two conversations with that one fella, the only two we've ever had and the only two we're ever likely to have, as a pair, they were one of the most formative moments in the path that would eventually lead me back to the Christian God, to seminary, to a collar 'round my neck, and, ultimately, to here. Now that's a surprise. The funny thing is, I don't actually remember much of the specifics of those conversations. I do remember how I felt and what was going on around us. I remember the awe at our world's playfulness in allowing this to happen. And I remember thinking just how deeply grateful I was.

But I do remember one thing that Buddhist monk said. "I know your world," he said. "I know the Christian world. I've left it for reasons that don't matter much, but for you, I take great joy in knowing that you are Christian. Because Christians follow the God of Surprises. And in that knowledge is delight. You follow the God of Surprises." In spite of fifteen years of life gone by -- of monotony and grace and disappointment and surprise -- in spite of all that, that has stayed with me, improbably remembered and delightfully consistent. How did I get here? The God of Surprises. Not always pleasant ones, mind you, but for sure, unexpected.

Lent is a time for us to look back. To examine those lives of ours, a day, a week, a year at a time. To laugh with Sarah at the Good News God brings. To wonder with Abraham at the stars in the sky and the children on our knees. To set our faces with Jesus turning towards Jerusalem. And to get ready, because the God we follow is the God of Surprises.