

“Surprise!”

Luke 12:32-40

Sunday, August 8, 2010

United Methodist Church of Yucaipa

Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening:

Bishop Peter Storey from South Africa tells a story of three men in town for a convention. They were assigned rooms on the 51st floor of the convention hotel. They had been out for an evening -- having had a late dinner and entertainment. When they came in, the elevator was out of order. Can you imagine that? In a room on the 51st floor and no way to get there but to climb the stairs.

It was a terrible dilemma, but they had no alternative. Being creative, they decided that they would devise a way to make that climb bearable. For 17 stories -- as they climbed the stairs -- they would tell funny stories. Then, for the next 17 stories, they would tell scary stories. Then, for the final 17 stories, they would tell sad stories.

Well, it did work. For 17 stories, they laughed and laughed as they told funny story after funny story, taking their minds off of their arduous climb. Then, for the next 17 stories there were the scary tales -- and that helped because it seemed to energize them. Then as they began the last trek -- up the steps of the last 17 stories -- they began to tell sad story after sad story. When they got to the 50th floor, they had run out of

stories seemingly. No one spoke up. Then it happened. One fellow broke the silence, "Fellows, here is the saddest story of all. I forgot the key at the reception desk."

The key -- whether a door is being opened, or a door is being closed -- the key is that we stay awake. Because we never know when we are going to be surprised by a new possibility. Nor do we ever know when something important is going to be taken from us.

I. Good Surprises

In today's scripture reading we are told to be ready, to be prepared for a surprise which may happen at any moment. Jesus says, "Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks." The master may come in the middle of the night or near dawn. We are to be "dressed for action" with "lamps lit" when he arrives.

His arrival surprises us in at least two ways.

The first surprise is the timing of his arrival. We may be ready to receive Jesus, expecting him to make his presence felt at a certain time. When we want and need him, we may expect him to be there for us. Our scripture reading, on the other hand, describes Jesus as a master who comes at an unknown time. And the determining factor of his coming is not our need but rather the timing of the wedding feast. Heavenly celebrations, holy banquets take precedence over our needs. We are to be "dressed for action" with "lamps lit," ready to serve our master according to his timing and not our own.

The irony is that if we are dressed for action, ready to serve, we will be served. The second surprise concerns the master's behavior.

The servants expect their master to behave in a certain way. The servants who watch their master leave for the wedding feast think they know him. They expect him upon his return to behave in ways which fit their narrow understanding of him. But the wedding feast frees the master to reveal all that he is to them. They may not be ready for this.

In the same way, we may be ready to receive the Jesus we think we know, but we may not be ready to receive the unexpected Jesus, the surprising Jesus. Our scripture says that if the servants are ready for action, with lamps lit, the master "will have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them."

This is a surprise. This is unexpected. Servants are not served by masters. Masters are served by servants. And yet if we are ready to serve Jesus, waiting with expectant joy for his presence with us, then he will serve us. This is his way. He is a Servant King.

Wallace Kirby tells a simple story about seeing a movie at the theater many years ago. He says, "I knew that the movie 'E.T.' would be a bore and that there would be nothing in it for me. Science fiction has never been an interest of mine. Tolkien's little creatures bored me. I just knew that a movie about an ugly little creature from outer space could not hold my attention. The first few minutes of the movie confirmed my reservations. But then, after somehow staying awake, I began to succumb to the charms of that movie. It spoke a different message than is usually wrapped around such matters. Beyond a telling portrayal of the openness of children to new truth, it also hinted that the

unknown is potentially friendly, and gentle, and caring. Had I walked out I would have missed a powerful, but subtle, theological affirmation of the goodness of creation - extending even to the unknown reaches of outer space.”

Sometimes Jesus surprises us by showing up at an unexpected time, in an unexpected place. For Wallace Kirby, a simple movie experience became a chance for him to wake up to new understandings of God. He expected to be bored; God had other plans.

Surprise! Jesus comes to us at times we cannot predict. Surprise! Jesus comes to us in ways we do not expect. We do not know the time. We do not know the way. We only know that we are to be ready and waiting.

Just as we live in constant expectation of Jesus acting in our present lives, so we are to live in constant expectation of Jesus’ return in power. In the present time Jesus’ promise of the kingdom is revealed only in part. We receive with joy every awareness we have of that kingdom among us. At the same time we dress for action and light our lamps, watching for the day when Jesus will come in power and his kingdom will be established on earth in fullness. Then he will serve a heavenly banquet for us and we will celebrate with him the wedding feast.

It is good to be ready and alert for the little ways Jesus touches our lives in the present, as well as being ready and alert for his bodily appearance among us at the end of the ages. To be dressed for action with lamps lit means to be dressed in our working clothes with our hearts and minds prepared to meet Christ. To be prepared to meet Christ at any moment is a difficult command. None of us has turned our lives over to Christ so completely that we are ready to follow him in every moment of every day. And the

parable warns us that Jesus may come to us at that moment when we are least ready. The servants are ready to meet their master after the wedding. They have been forewarned that he will return after the wedding and that it may be late. So they make every effort to be ready during the time they think he will be returning.

II. Disturbing Surprises

There is a story of a young pastor who once wrote his Bishop, inviting him to conduct a Quiet Hour in his church. Apparently the Bishop knew that congregation and said that he would not do it. "What your church needs," he wrote, "is not a Quiet Hour, but an earthquake." We want to be ready, we want to be awake, we want to be fully dressed, with lamps lit, when the Master returns. Even if it takes an earthquake to wake us up!

Our passage continues with another scenario. Says Jesus, "If the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Here the story takes a darker turn. Jesus no longer speaks of a wedding guest returning home happy and singing, filled with good food and good wine. Now he describes a thief, creeping up on an unsuspecting household, intentionally trying to catch them unawares. The surprise has a negative flavor to it now. It is not the joyful surprise of servants welcoming their master home from the party. It is the fearful surprise of awakening suddenly in the night to the sound of a prowler. The adrenaline rushes through your blood stream as your mind grasps frantically for a plan of action. But it is too late. The thief has caught you sleeping and now all that you have will be lost. You may even lose your life!

Jesus warns his disciples that the Evil One is very real. The thief in the night will surprise them as the master surprises the servants, but the thief's surprise will not be pleasant. The Evil One will take full advantage of those who are not ready.

So there seems to be no hope. None of us is able to predict when Jesus will come. None of us is able to be ready and waiting 24 hours a day. None of us is prepared to meet Jesus daily in every way he makes himself known to us. None of us is prepared to meet Jesus when he comes on that final day. This is a distressing passage of scripture. I thought I liked surprises, but Jesus' surprises seem too painful to accept.

A U.S. Army officer told of the contrast in his pupils during two different eras of teaching at the artillery training school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma (Home of the Field Artillery). In 1958-60 the attitude was so lax that the instructors had a problem getting the men to stay awake to hear the lectures. During the 1965-67 classes, however, the men, hearing the same basic lectures, were alert and took copious notes. What made the difference in the class of 65? They knew that in less than six weeks they would be facing the enemy in Vietnam.

When we know the urgency of our situation, we are more anxious to be ready.

The story is told of Augustine, a man in the 5th century who became Bishop of the church and a saint in history, that he originally lead a life of sin, giving himself over to whatever pleasures presented themselves. His mother had earnestly prayed for him his entire life that he would give his life to the service of Christ, but Augustine persisted in his sins until one day he sat with a friend on a bench weeping over the state of his life. It was at this moment that he heard a boy or girl--he says he does not know which it was -- singing a song. The sound was coming from a neighboring house. The child was

chanting over and over: "Pick it up, read it; pick it up; read it." Here is what happened next in Augustine's own words:

Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon.

So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostles book. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof." I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away."

Had Christ returned before that fateful day, Augustine would have been caught unprepared. He would have been found asleep. From that moment on, however, Augustine was prepared. He was on the alert! He had awakened from his sins.

III. "Fear not." God is in charge of the surprises.

Jesus does offer comfort and assurance in today's reading. He says, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The Evil One's goal

is to catch us unawares. But God's goal is to give us the kingdom. We need not fear, for what is impossible with us is possible with God. If we faithfully seek the kingdom, God will give it to us. God will help us to be ready and waiting for its arrival, even though it may be difficult to be faithful sometimes.

Closing:

There is a woman who is buried under a 150-year-old live oak tree in the cemetery of an Episcopal church in rural Louisiana. In accordance with this woman's instructions, only one word is carved on the tombstone: "Waiting."

This is the peace and assurance of our reading for today. We are waiting for a good Master, a Servant King, our beloved Jesus to return. We know he will protect us from the thief who comes in the night, if we align ourselves – these houses of our souls – with his.

He is a surprising Master. We do not know when, or how he will arrive. At any given moment, he astonishes us with his timing and his behavior.

Jesus is the truth, and his presence sets us wishing for that truth to become a reality among us. Even though we may fear the strangeness, even though we may be surprised by the timing and the behavior of Jesus when he comes, still we find ourselves wishing for his kingdom, his truth. The truth is that Jesus appears to us in many surprising ways, and they are all true. May we be dressed for action, with lamps lit, ready to joyfully greet Jesus in whatever form he comes to us. Amen.