

Our God of Great Surprises

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Acts 12:1-17

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Our God is the God of great surprises, who, in the midst of every situation in life, finds a way to remind us of His presence and surprise us with His love and His encouragement.

Surprises are an interesting dimension of our lives. A surprise is anything that happens that you don't see coming. Some surprises are wonderful. A surprise birthday party. The announcement of a new baby on the way. An old friend contacts you. Some surprises are irritating and even devastating. A difficult medical diagnosis. Loss of a job. A friend of mine called this week; a new boss said he was no longer needed. Or a surprise on the scale of 9/11 or of the unexpected financial turmoil that began last fall. Surprises can shock us, astonish us, amaze us, stun us, flabbergast us, startle and even frighten us. Of course, we read of many surprises in God's Big Story. God calling Moses out of a burning bush. God calling Samuel when he was in his bed. Jesus turning water to wine, walking on water and the ultimate surprise, his resurrection from the dead. Our God is the God of great surprises, who, in the midst of every situation in life, finds a way to remind us of His presence and surprise us with His love and His encouragement.

Dave Peterson tells of a time he and his wife, Terry, were about to take a trip across country. Dave said, "I thought, what could we eat that would be fast and wouldn't require cooking because we were

leaving late in the day. I thought, chef's salad that would be perfect. I've never made a chef's salad before but I thought how complicated can that be, really? Some vegetables and some cold cuts and some cheese. And then, at the last moment, I remembered eggs. You've got to have some hard-boiled eggs. My problem was, now some of you are going to laugh at this," said Dave, "but I didn't know how long it took to cook an egg to make it hard-boiled and some of you are going to smile and laugh but you don't know either, do you. I had no idea but I had heard something about a three-minute egg. So I boiled them for three minutes, set them aside, they cooled. But when I opened an egg it was soft-boiled and runny."

Dave said, "I am happy the next part was my wife's idea. She said, 'They're almost cooked. I wonder what would happen if we put them in the microwave.' So I was calculating how long you would have to put an almost-cooked egg in the microwave to cook it completely. I thought, how about a minute and a half. It's not rocket science. Part way through, there was a big muffled explosion. I look in the microwave. Egg everywhere. I cleaned out the micro but I've got three other eggs. So, I'm thinking to myself, about when did that egg blow up in the microwave. I cal-

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culated that it took about 50 seconds. I put the second one in and set it for 35 seconds. Kind of a Mr. Science project going on. Meanwhile, we were packing to leave and I went out-side to roll up the hose. I hear this scream from inside the kitchen. I went inside the kitchen and my wife, Terry, is standing in exactly this pose—hand cupped holding nothing and her eyes wide open, and she's got egg everywhere. She's got it in her hair, she's got it in her eyes, and she's got in her mouth, on her clothes. The egg is on the ceiling, it's on the counters; you have no idea how many places one egg can go. It seems that it was still one egg when she took it out of the microwave, and as she was carrying it to the sink is when it exploded and it went everywhere." Now that's a surprise! It's something you don't see coming!

Our God is the God of great surprises. God loves to surprise and bless God's people. Yes, life can be exhilarating and exciting, and, yes, life can be demanding and difficult. We learn from the Psalms in the Old Testament that we walk together in difficult and pleasant places. In all of the experiences of life, our good Lord loves to come alongside and surprise us with his love and his interest in us. The story from the twelfth chapter of the book of Acts we are looking at this morning is extremely interesting and entertaining, as God's people rediscover the wonderful surprise—that our God actually is with us in every moment.

The first part of the story begins with a terrible surprise. While the church has been spreading rapidly outward from Jerusalem with great joy, suddenly it faces the kind of opposition it will face on and off throughout history. ¹“About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. ²He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.” When Jesus had called the two young men, James and John, away from their father's fishing nets to follow him, they were known as the Sons of Thunder. Now, one of the Sons of Thunder was dead. Not only were the religious authorities persecuting the Christians, but now the secular authority as well. ³“After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴“When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.” Assigning four squads of soldiers to guard Peter seems to be overkill, but it gives you some indication of how nervous the authorities were about this new Christian movement and their leaders. What is clear is that there is no way Peter is getting out of there on his own. It's a maximum security Alcatraz situation. Things are looking very bleak for the small band of Christians, as there was no way for Peter to escape. ⁵“While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.” Mean-while, the church has gathered and they are praying like crazy for Peter;

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because James, the brother of John, had been murdered by King Herod, they knew his life was genuinely at risk.

What happens next is such a delight to read as we see the God of great surprises make His presence known in a difficult moment. “⁶ The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.” That’s great. Peter’s likely fate was death the next day and he goes to sleep. He utterly trusts our Lord. “⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’” Now this translation is being polite when it reads the angel “tapped” Peter on the side. The original word (*patasso*) means to strike. The old King James Version translated it “smote.” The angel struck Peter on the side. It sound like the angel walked over to the sleeping Peter and kicked him! “Wake Up!” So, Peter wakes up probably thinking, Huh? What?, and the chains fell off his wrists. “⁸ The angel said to him, ‘Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.’ He did so. Then he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’” ⁹ Peter went out and followed him.” He did not realize that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. When you wake in the middle of an intense dream, you can have that moment in which your dream

and your reality seem a bit mixed up. Peter assumes he is still chained between two guards and this is some kind of vision.

“¹⁰ After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord.” Acts reports the gate opened by itself! There were no electric motors in those days! This was the sheer power of God. When people talk about the miracles described in the Bible, this event is rarely discussed, but a miracle it is. When is the last time you faced an iron gate or any door that opened by itself without the aid of an external force or an internal mechanism? Ours is the God of great surprises who is capable of opening any door. From the Exodus rescue of the people of God out of Egypt to Peter’s rescue to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our God is the God who opens gates. Revelation 3:8: “See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” Does God open every gate? No. In this very story about Peter, we have already seen that James, the brother of John, was put to death with a sword. James was not freed by an angel and did not escape Herod’s grasp. But James believed in Jesus Christ and, in the grasp of Jesus, James did experience heaven’s open door. Our Lord saw him through what he was going through, and our Lord will see you through what you are going through.

Think about the iron gates in your life. Spend some time thinking about the description of the iron gate: “It opened for them by itself.”

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Our God is a God of power and is very capable of opening gates. If God chooses not to open a gate, then he will provide other means of support and encouragement to you. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). Lord whether I am in front of a gate, through a gate, or on the other side of a gate, I am grateful that you are with me! Surprise me with your love!

And they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹Then Peter came to himself and said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’” So, Peter is vastly surprised and encouraged by the power and presence of God. And the story continues. ¹²As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. ¹³When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴On recognizing Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate.” That’s great. Peter is a fugitive and knows the authorities will be looking for him, and Rhoda the maid is so surprised to hear his voice she leaves him standing out front and reports he is there to the Christians who have gathered to pray for Peter.

What do you suppose their reaction was? You’d imagine they

would have said, Rhoda, we have been praying for Peter for hours now and so we are not surprised Peter has been freed from jail and is here. That’s what you’d think they’d say but what they actually said, was ¹⁵...‘You are out of your mind!’ But she insisted that it was so. They said, ‘It is his angel.’ ¹⁶Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ [Talk about the God of great surprises!] He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.” Perhaps that’s the key line, the Lord brought him out of prison. Peter could not save himself. Whatever your prison may be, our Lord walks with you, and you will know the God of great surprises surprising you with His presence and His love.

It’s easy to pray but to assume nothing will happen or never imagine how God may act as those Christians praying for Peter never imagined what would happen. It’s easy to give lip service to the reality and power of God and look for nothing new in a situation. Nevertheless, Our God is a God of great surprises who loves to intervene in our lives in large and small ways that we have not anticipated or expected. Expectation is very much the stuff of faith—as we trust and expect our Lord to be an active participant in our lives whether we are in a place of joy and encouragement or find ourselves in the depths of the valley of the shadow. Open your eyes of faith expecting God’s work in your life! Psalm 5:3:

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“In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.”

Not only is our God the God of great surprises who loves to encourage His people, so you and I are to grow in the image and likeness of our God and become the people of great surprises who love to surprise with blessings the people in our lives. Are you a person who brings surprises of blessings into the people in your life just as your Lord surprises you with blessings?

Last Tuesday, I was in Florence, South Carolina, working with the presbytery there as my main work through the Vital Churches Institute, which is working with some twenty presbyteries around the country to help their churches grow in vitality. Tuesday was our daughter Lindsay’s thirtieth birthday. Her husband, Don, has just been stationed at Hickem Air Force Base in Honolulu and, while that has some exciting elements to it, it was not easy for them to travel so far away from family. I had already talked with Lindsay about her birthday and was sitting in a restaurant that evening when my phone rang. I don’t normally answer my phone in a restaurant, but it was her special day, so I said, “Hi, Honey.” She was so excited, I could not understand her. Turns out she and Don were at a restaurant celebrating her birthday when someone tapped her on the shoulder and asked if there was more room at her table. She turned around to

discover our son, Lee, and his wife, Sophia, had flown to Honolulu to surprise her. She literally shook with joy for thirty minutes. The people of the God of great surprises can be the people of great surprises and of blessings.

I remember the summer that our son, Lee, graduated from high school. We started thinking that the father of the prodigal son waited until the son came home before bringing out the fatted calf. We thought, Why wait until our son comes home from college? Why not bless and send Lee that same way now? I went to a butcher and asked for five T-bone steaks. He asked, “How thick?” I had always gone to a commissary or a supermarket in the past where you pick cut meat up in the meat department. I said, “What do you mean how thick? Don’t they come in standard thicknesses!” He just rolled his eyes. So, I brought home five thick, juicy steaks and we had a feast. Then, our family gathered around Lee and laid hands on him. After each one had had an opportunity to pray for Lee, I prayed:

“Lord, may Lee know who he is and Whose he is, May he know that wherever he goes you are sending him, that you have a purpose in his being there,

May he remain true to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

And now, bless Lee and keep him; make Your face to shine upon him and be gracious to him. The Lord turn his face toward Lee and give him peace.”

I don't mind telling you that by the time we finished we were a

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mess! It was emotional. It was powerful. Lee left knowing he was sent. Remember, there is a big difference between leaving and being sent. To leave means to no longer be a part of. To be sent is to go out on behalf of, to go with a mission, to look forward to a return. When daughter Lindsay graduated from high school, she remembered the emotion of Lee's sending and said she didn't want us to send her. It happened that her birthday was just before she left for college and, as we sat around the table celebrating her birthday, on a pre-arranged signal the whole family jumped up, surrounded Lindsay, laid hands on her, prayed for her and sent her. It was a surprise. It was emotional. It was powerful. When daughter Shelley graduated from high school, the other kids had flown the nest, but Lee and his fiancée were to be married just before Shelley went to college. After the rehearsal dinner, Lee dropped by our motel room, and we realized it was to be the last time we would ever be together just as mom and dad and our three kids. And we realized we could send Shelley, and in another emotional surprise and blessing, laid hands on her and prayed for her—as well as for Lee and Sophia's wedding. Powerful.

Our God is the God of great surprises, and you can expect Him in the midst of any situation in life to surprise you with His love and encouragement. And, as our God is the God of great surprises, so you are to be a person of great surprises and look for ways to

surprise the people in your life in ways that will bring the blessing, joy and encouragement of God into their lives.

