

Surprise

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17, 25-27

Just like I shared with the children: “Happy Birthday!”

I have to admit; I LOVE Pentecost. It is without a doubt one of my favorite celebrations in the church year. I suspect it is, in part, because it is something so radically different that it moves us from complacency into awe.

I especially love it here at IPC, where we live in our own unique Pentecost on a regular basis. One time I tried to identify the number of languages spoken by members of our church family and got lost somewhere past 30! I suspect that if someone today would hear our reading of the Pentecost story, they would be either amazed or say something like, “Oh, yeah, that’s IPC”.

When we think of God, we think of many things...Creator of all that is, Jehovah, Yahweh, the list goes on and on. However, if God has a seldom recognized “signature”, it must be bringing surprising results from lost causes.

Think about it...time and time again in the Bible we read stories of lost people and lost causes being transformed by God:

* Abraham and Sarah gave up after hoping for a child long into old age, until God made them a promise.

* Peter fished all night without a catch before Jesus told him to throw the nets on the other side.

* A woman who had been suffering with bleeding for twelve years walked in a crowd, feeling invisible and alone until she caught sight of Jesus and reached out for Him.

* The body of the Savior of the world was placed in a tomb and sealed off with a stone...until the third day brought a surprise that would change the world in a way it had never seen and never expected.

Now those examples sometimes seem so far away, however there’s one more I would like to share with you, from another passion in my life. It’s the story of a not-very-successful composer.

For years his life was filled with debt, despair, loss and infirmity. A cerebral hemorrhage let him paralyzed on one side, and for four years he couldn’t walk, much less write.

Then, at age sixty, after attempting several mediocre compositions for opera, he fell even deeper into debt and hopelessness and assumed his life was over. At this point a friend challenged him to write a sacred oratorio, a work dedicated to God.

For twenty-four days, he sequestered himself, read God's Word, and passionately worked nonstop, hardly stopping even to eat. His new work was far more ambitious than anything he had attempted before, a more grandiose production with all its lyrics taken straight from Scripture.

At his lowest point, he took his biggest risk. What emerged many consider to be the greatest oratorio ever written.

Untold millions of people have heard the inspiring melody and had their hearts lifted by the lyrics declaring God to be "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" and ending with a chorus of Hallelujahs that could have been sung straight from the angels in heaven.

George Frederic Handel's *Messiah* was yet another surprise from what some considered a lost cause. Like Sarah, Peter and the unnamed woman, God surprises us time and again by showing up and reversing circumstances that are stacked against Him...and us.

Why are we surprised when God shows up and reverses life's circumstances? Being astonished again and again by God's intervention is a bit like having friends throw you a surprise party every year on your birthday but you are still thrown off guard in true shock when you open the door and the lights come on the the sound of "surprise"!

But today is about a different kind of birthday party, and a surprise party at that.

Jesus' followers were gathered together, waiting, for fifty days after Easter. It wasn't someone coming in the door who would be surprised, but those gathered for the holy Jewish celebration. They didn't know what to expect, but they certainly didn't anticipate anything like what happened; no one could have!

When we think of the strange events that happened on that Pentecost day, we often focus on the spectacular occurrences; the tongues of fire, the violent wind, and the sudden ability to speak other languages. Don't get me wrong, those had to be a great shock to the disciples, their friends, even the strangers gathered there. You heard how some of the crowd guessed that the disciples were drunk; it was the easiest explanation. I'm pretty sure that would be the reaction today as well.

However, I'm convinced that the greatest surprise of all, the truly astonishing outcome that occurred, was the change in the followers of Jesus – not just for the moment, but from that point on. Sure, the tongues of fire, wind and languages were showy, but they weren't the end result, only a step along the way.

Once they received the Holy Spirit, the followers of Christ were different. Their lives would never be the same. They were bolder, more able to minister with power from God, less afraid of human reactions or retribution, more unified and certain of their purpose to spread the Gospel. These were just a few of the characteristics of a new body of believers born that day, the one we would come to call the church.

All of the surprising, amazing, unexpected, world changing events that happened throughout the stories recorded in Acts I've shared with you would never have happened without the day of Pentecost, the day the church was born. Every Pentecost since then has been a celebration of the church's birthday, the day we remember with awe how the Holy Spirit took a ragtag band of followers (I'm talking about us here, not just those first disciples!) and made them into something powerful for God's Kingdom.

But that's the way it works, doesn't it? God surprises us, most often when we least expect it. Whether it was telling an old lady to be ready to bear a child, a fisherman how to fish or simply fulfilling prophecy by giving the most precious gift of all to you and me, God has always been there, ready to surprise us.

And, like those first followers, we can respond in the same way: Becoming bolder, more able to minister with power from God, less afraid of human reactions or retribution, more unified and certain of our purpose to spread the Gospel.

The most exciting, the most overlooked part of that incredible event wasn't in the "show stuff" but in the lives of the followers both then and in the years and generations to come.

And that brings us to the here and the now.

The early believers relied on those original disciples to instruct, guide and lead them as they grew in their faith. They would have been lost without those who had known Jesus personally. However, it became abundantly clear that, with Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was doing a new thing. The torch was clearly passed to a new and growing body called the church. New leaders and new witnesses would grow and mature and become the leaders of the expanding body of Christ.

No longer would the faithful be limited, they would be open and expectant of the unfolding surprises of God in their lives.

And once, again, that brings us to the here and now.

Thirteen years ago, I accepted the invitation to interview to become the servant/leader of IPC. At that time, I didn't know we worshiped in an abandoned middle school library, protected by a security gate that required an attendant every time we would meet. I didn't know that we would move our entire congregation, not once but twice, in our pilgrimage to find a new home, a new place of worship.

I didn't understand the emotional strength it would take to constantly invest in making new friends with those who are a part of our church family for a few years, nor the emotional strength it would take to say goodbye to those friends after too few years, perhaps to never meet again.

There are so many things I did not know, and with the luxury of 20/20 hindsight, things I would have done differently.

However, one thing I DID know, and that was that it was and is my responsibility to be sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and to say "yes" to the call to ministry when it is presented.

So it was that Sue and I made the leap to come to Brussels in August of 2006. It was the same leap that had taken us to St. Louis, to Cape Girardeau, to Iowa, to Cheyenne, and to New York.

And it is the same leap that now takes us away from a place we love and a style of ministry we understand into another unknown: Intentional Interim ministry, called to be temporary shepherds of God's flock in a village of 5,000 souls.

If I have learned anything from Pentecost, however, it is that God is full of surprises and God's surprises are always rich, blessings laden and fulfilling. So, even though we do not know what it means to be "semi-retired" or "interim ministers", we will respond, like the hymn we just sang, by saying "Here I am, Lord".

In the same way, it is my joy to share with you another of God's wonderful surprises...

(One final tangent...you KNEW it had to happen! I am wearing a red stole, one that is rarely worn in the liturgical season. The stole is the symbol of the servant/leader. Red is the color of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The stole is usually only worn on Pentecost and other very special days in the life of the church.)

I have been both privileged and blessed to be allowed to serve and lead IPC. That time is now at an end. This stole is no longer mine to wear, it belongs to the next pastor of IPC.

(remove stole)

I placed it on the Communion Table, because it is there that we expect to meet God. God waits for us everywhere, but especially here. I promise you, that is true.

It is there that, at some point in the near future, your next pastor will pick up the stole, along with the joys and responsibilities of being your next servant/leader. And that is good...the way it should be.

Your next pastor will not be a Murray, or a Braham or a Jake or any other who has gone before. He will be different, bringing unique gifts, talents, skills and joys to this wonderful congregation.

And he will bring surprises...as well as be surprised by this group called "IPC".

My Pentecost prayer is that God will continue to surprise the world...and us!