

SURPRISING GOD

1 KINGS 8:22-23, 41-43; LUKE 7:1-10

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

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I'm going to begin with a story that I have told before.

During our time in BC, a woman who was deeply committed to her faith in Jesus once plunked herself down in my office on the verge of tears.

She had been attempting to read through the entire Bible but was ready to give up.

She was somewhere in Jeremiah and was getting fed up with all of the violence and judgment. She could no longer handle this God who seemed obsessed with Israel to the exclusion of all others.

In a tone mixed with exasperation and despair, she blurted out, "You either need to explain to me what's going on or give me permission to stop reading! **Who is this God?!**"

For many, one of the biggest challenges to faith is its perceived *exclusivity*.

We are more aware than ever of the diversity of beliefs in our world and the role that our cultural upbringing and social location affect what we believe. We are aware that others see things differently than us.

We are aware that our own faith tradition has often claimed to have sole access to the truth, and that this has led to all kinds of negative consequences for others in our world, whether we are talking about the broad scope of world history or our own circle of relationships.

Perhaps this doesn't describe a reality you are familiar with at all.

But for many, I think it does. I talk to people every week who tell me things like this.

Many of us long for a better way to understand our faith and our world.

We long for a faith that pleases Jesus. We want to be faithful.

But we are uneasy about the way that Christianity has been understood and practiced as highly exclusive—as if we have the corner on truth and everyone else out there is in a sea of ignorance and darkness.

The title of my sermon today is “Surprising God.” I think our texts today invite us to interpret this title in two ways.

First, in our gospel text today, one of the few times in the NT where Jesus *himself* is said to have been “amazed” or “surprised.”

Jesus has just finished his Sermon on the Plain, Luke’s equivalent of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, where he lays out what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

He is in Capernaum, on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee.

There, we read of a Roman centurion who had a servant who meant a great deal to him and who was close to death.

The centurion knows who Jesus is and sends a group of Jewish elders—probably local synagogue leaders—to Jesus to request healing for this servant.

It’s interesting to note how the elders approach Jesus. They realize that they are about to ask Jesus to come and do something good for a “foreigner.” Even worse, he is an *occupier*, a representative of the enemies of the Jewish people.

In Jesus’ day, of course, the people of Israel were a conquered people. The Roman Empire stretched across much of what is now Europe, the Mediterranean world, and parts of Asia Minor. It was a vast empire that was ruled, as *all* empires are, by force.

The Roman centurion in question would have been a mid-ranking military officer who was stationed in Capernaum. He probably would have been charged with overseeing Rome’s interest in this far-flung outpost, keeping the peace, making sure those under Rome’s influence behaved themselves, and generally served as a reminder of who was in charge.

Nonetheless, we have every indication that he was a decent man. The Jewish elders sing his praises to Jesus when they initially come to him.

“It’s ok if you help this “unclean” man, they say in essence, “he’s been good to us, he ‘loves us.’ He built us a synagogue.”

In other words, “yes, we know he’s a foreigner, but he’s the *right kind* of foreigner because he’s nice to us.

(Kind of a self-serving sales job, but there you go ☺. Jesus doesn't comment on their motives.)

Jesus begins toward the centurion's house but before he arrives the centurion says, "don't even come into my home" (Jews would have been made ritually unclean by entering a Gentile home). "I know what it is to have authority, and I know that you need only speak the word and my servant will be healed. I know that you have the authority to do this."

The faith of the centurion *surprises*, even *amazes* Jesus.

Indeed, he says he has not found such faith *even in Israel*...

.... even among the people of God, the carriers of God's story.
.... even among those who were supposed to know God best.
.... even among the ones who had this long and fitful history of walking with God, learning his ways, hearing about his miraculous deliverances, marinating in his Scriptures and his promises.

What is it about this foreigner's faith that surprises Jesus?

It doesn't seem to be the impressive depth and breadth of his theological knowledge or his biblical acumen.

It doesn't seem to be his impressive ethical record that the Jewish elders were so eager to point out to Jesus.

The text gives no indication that Jesus had ever encountered this man before healing his slave, so the faith that amazes Jesus seems only to be based on this one experience.

The faith that surprises Jesus seems quite simply to be a simple, unquestioning trust in the person of Jesus and in his authority to accomplish his will.

The centurion in essence says, "I know that you are a man who has the ability to do for me what I cannot do for myself. I believe you can do it. Please do it."

It's almost that simple.

And Jesus honours this simple faith by healing his servant.

[This is not a formula for viewing prayer or faith as a means of always getting what we want from God. There is plenty throughout Scripture to suggest that God does not work this way, but that is another sermon.]

I think Jesus is commending the centurion's faith for several reasons:

- for its simplicity
- for its humility ("I didn't presume to come to you...")
- for its basic trust in the person of Jesus.

It is not faith in an abstract intellectual system or a "worldview" or an elaborate program of rites and rituals or any of the other strategies that we devise to manage or appease or impress God.

It is a basic confidence in the person of Jesus—a conviction that despite the many things that we may not know or understand, despite the many unanswered questions we have, that *this man* is the key to life, has power over even death, and, perhaps most importantly, can be *trusted*.

This *was* and *is* the faith that surprises Jesus.

I think our texts today also allow us to interpret "Surprising God" in another way.

Quite simply, the God of Israel, the God most clearly seen in Jesus of Nazareth is a surprising God.

As I mentioned in the opening story, one of the charges frequently leveled against the God of the Bible or against Christianity in general is that it's all just too *exclusive*. God has his favourites, whether the people of Israel in the past or Christians today.

I hear some version of this nearly every week, in one context or another.

How can you believe that you Christians are the only ones who are right and everyone else is wrong?

Or... How can we believe that we are the only ones who are right and everyone else is wrong.

The question comes from both outside *and* inside the faith—from those who are critical of the faith, and from those inside who have misgivings about how it has been understood and practiced.

We had a lively debate as pastors and leaders on this topic at a recent Mennonite Church Alberta Theological Studies Conference, where the topic was the nature of inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

One afternoon a number of questions came up: Is Jesus the only way? Is Jesus *one* way among many? Do people other faiths have access to God? Should we invite them to become Christians or honour the faith they already have?

The questions obviously apply to how we look at all people, not just Muslims.

They are important questions.

I think that the Bible is quite clear that we ought always be seeking to make disciples, always inviting people to come and see what we have discovered to be true in Jesus.

There is a temptation in our culture to kind of blend all religions together, as kind of different ways to get to the same destination. But Jesus is quite clear that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father through him.

Having said that....

Jesus regularly holds up the “wrong” sorts of people as exemplars of faith—and he often does this to the very religious people who were quite certain that they had the market cornered on God and his ways.

We could look to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mat. 25:31-46) where those who expected to “get in” are left out and those who are welcomed in seem to be caught completely by surprise. The criterion is not right belief, but.... Did you feed and clothe the least of these? Did you visit those in prison?

We could look to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where a man from the people of Israel’s most hated enemy was held up as an example of how to fulfill Israel’s law, how to love one’s neighbour in the proper way (Luke 10:25-37).

But that’s all NT stuff, you might say. What about the OT?

It is undeniable that there are many Scriptures that seem to quite straightforwardly give the impression that God cares mainly about Israel.

But there are always hints.

Our first Scripture reading today came from the book of 1 Kings, a book that describes Israel at the height of its nationalistic power.

The text Claire read was two small portions of a longer prayer of dedication for the Temple that King David had wanted to build for the Lord, but which his son Solomon had instead built.

And here, at this moment of national pride and unity, this moment to celebrate the people who have conquered and risen to power and the God who has chosen, called, and led them to this point, Solomon prays for a wide variety of things related to the interests of the people of Israel. He also prays for...

.... foreigners?

He prays for people who are not part of the “in group.”

He assumes that people who are not part of the people of God will come to know Israel’s God, in whatever way.

He assumes that God is and will continue to be active *outside* of the people of Israel.

And he prays that his God will “do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.”

A thousand or so years later, his prayer is answered in the story of the Roman centurion.

Both meanings of “surprising God” invite us to simple trust in the person of Jesus and in his care for the world.

The example of the Roman centurion invites us to surprise Jesus with our faith.

We don’t always find it easy to trust like this.

Perhaps we have seen one too many prayers go “unanswered.” Perhaps we have seen too much pain in our life. Perhaps we don’t have the confidence that Jesus really has our best interests in mind.

Or, perhaps like so many, we don’t think of trust in Jesus in personal terms like this at all.

Perhaps we think of faith in terms of a kind of worldview or ethical system that guides and motivates and legitimates our behaviour. Perhaps we think of faith as an intellectual exercise that explains the meaning of life or the origins of the universe or something like that.

Whatever the case may be, I think that our text from Luke invites *all* of us back to a simple trust in the authority, the power, the goodness, and the *trustworthiness* of Jesus.

In the second sense of “surprising God,” I think we are invited to trust that our God is not a tribalistic God who only cares about his favourites. We can have confidence that God is the God of the whole world and is at work in the lives of all *kinds* of people.

C.S. Lewis, in Mere Christianity, put it like this:

If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view.

We don't have to try to make everyone like us or assume that faith must look the same in every case.

God has a long history of surprising his people. God has always shown himself to "foreigners," whether we are talking about Roman centurions, Samaritans...

... or those who do not share our beliefs today.

We do not have to assume that there is only darkness outside of the Christian tent—we can be confident that God is at work in the lives of our neighbours, whether they are Muslims or Aboriginals or Buddhists or Jewish folks or secularists or whatever.

God loves the foreigner. Indeed, God frequently uses the "foreigner" to instruct those who consider themselves to have privileged access to the ways of God.

May God help us, like the Roman centurion, to have a simple and unshakeable faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

May God also help us to be on the lookout for what God might have to teach us through the faith of the foreigner.

May we be expectant and grateful for the goodness and the truth we find, however strange it might be, and however unexpected its source.

Amen.