

“Surprise!”
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15
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Prepared for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, by Rev. Julia Watkins

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for God has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

There are two types of people in this world: those who love surprises and *the others* who can't stand them. By my tone, you may have guessed that I just so happen to be among the former. I love surprises.

I am in awe of the sunsets I didn't expect to catch after a long, cloudy day.

I get excited when random letters from faraway friends appear in my mailbox.

I love the Cinderella stories when an unheard-of underdog takes the tournament.

I passionately avoid spoilers. Rather than ruin their endings, I would retrieve each Harry Potter book at the midnight release and shut myself in my room, emerging *only* for food, sleeping *only* when necessary until I turned the final page.

At least half of my delight in surprises is in the waiting. When one year, my family suggested we each open a gift on Christmas Eve, I revolted, preferring to prolong the anticipation as long as possible.

I love surprises, whether they're for me or someone else. In my heart, I'm a little like the Saturday Night Live character, Sue, who can hardly contain herself in the classic skit called “The Surprise Party.”¹ Picture a man (in this case, played by Christopher Walken) sharing with friends his hopes to celebrate his granddaughter's birthday with (spoiler alert) a surprise party. No sooner has he proposed the plan than Sue is wiggling in her seat. With each idea he offers, Sue's excitement grows.

¹ “Surprise Party,” YouTube, accessed July 27, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4R1yybhmHg>

Balloons? YES.

A cake? Oh boy!

And the look on the birthday girl's face? That's the best part!!!

Sue is beside herself with excitement. "She is gonna walk in here and think that nobody's here!" exclaims Sue. "I don't know what she's going to do when she sees the balloons! And we're hidden! And she's surprised!"

Now, Sue may be overreacting to the obvious, but it's true. A great surprise is all in the set-up. In order for folks to be truly surprised, they shouldn't be able to see it coming. You think they all forgot your birthday or your anniversary and then? Surprise!!!

Of course, surprises also work in the opposite direction. You may have the highest of hopes and biggest of plans when suddenly you receive the denial letter, lose your dream job, or discover a dim diagnosis. "One moment I was a regular person with regular problems. And the next, I was someone with cancer," writes Duke Divinity professor, Kate Bowler, describing the sort of surprise that's as gut-wrenching as it is familiar.² Bowler goes on to detail how the surprise of her diagnosis with Stage IV cancer at the age of 35 was amplified by the expectations that preceded it. I imagined "anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life's journey," she writes, "I believed God would make a way." Surprise.

Surprises are all about our expectations. Whether our hopes are lofty or very little, they shape how we receive reality. For better or worse, any sense of certainty only sets us up for more shock when unforeseen circumstances shatter what we had assumed to be unshakeable.

Surprises are all about our expectations. Bearing that idea in mind, I want to propose that expectations—both ours and the Israelites'—may inform how we approach today's text, as one that is full of unforeseen circumstances.

By the time we reach them, the Israelites have been *through* it. They have lived as forced laborers in Egypt, endured plagues of death and darkness, managed a harrowing escape across a parted sea, and passed through a fleeting oasis, all so they could find themselves wandering across a long, barren wilderness. As scripture tells it, God's people have been walking for the better part of two months without any real idea where the Lord might be leading them.

They have made it this far, but their circumstances hardly seem to have improved. If anything, the combination of weariness and weak memory has led the Israelites to believe they're in worse shape now than they once were. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt," they moan. At least there, life was predictable. At least there, life was stable. At least there, life was safe.

Compared to the comforts the Israelites seem to recall—no matter how erroneously—from their time in Egypt, the wilderness offers few amenities. God's people are hungry, thirsty, and tired, and their prospects remain as uncertain as their present. Without Google Maps to give them a trip overview, let alone restaurant recommendations en route, the Israelites are growing restless and struggling to take it one tentative step at a time.

Given the set-up, I can't imagine Israel's expectations amount to much. The wilderness is not a place that produces high hopes, nor is it for the faint of heart. Instead, it is an environment where only the strange and the strong—those who have adapted to the most extreme circumstances—tend to survive.

² Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason*. New York: Random House, 2018.

Have you seen those David Attenborough specials? Those nature documentaries where the only things that live in the desert seem to be snakes, locusts, and the occasional camel? Well, the Israelites don't have half the survival skills of a camel, and here in the wilderness, they aren't feeling particularly fortified.

As one commentator puts it, their food crisis has become a faith crisis.³ With many miles behind them and countless more ahead, their stomachs have grown empty and their imaginations limited, the best apparent outcome being the return to a predictable, if oppressive, past.

No, the Israelites don't have great expectations. Here, in the wilderness, their hopes have bottomed out, their hearts turned against their given leaders, and their sights mournfully set on a world they'll never know again, a world that never cared for them anyhow.

If this were the set-up for a surprise party, the Israelites would be perfectly primed for the big reveal. Not only are they hungry, but they also pity themselves all alone. Their expectations have hit rock bottom, and if there's any good news going around, they'd be the last to see it coming.

Amid this narrow set of circumstances, a series of surprises unfolds.

First, the God whom the people had believed to be absent listens and responds. "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites," says the Lord, and they will be fed. A sign, it seems, that things may be looking up.

No sooner has God made this promise than quail begin to cover the camp, providing plenty of meat to eat. Where their stomachs were just grumbling, now they are full. Now, *this* is getting good.

And finally, the icing on the cake: something so unexpected it catches the Israelites totally by surprise. This time, God gives them something more mysterious, a substance foreign enough that they respond not with gratitude or relief but with utter confusion.

"What is it?!" they ask, and it's easy to imagine the stupefied expressions scrawled across their faces. Like children who unwrap a gift, only to discover it's something they never considered needing, the Israelites do not seem particularly impressed with God's offering; in fact, they seem downright disappointed.

"What is it?" they say to one another, so baffled that Moses must spell it out for them, carefully mouthing each syllable so the people might come to understand. "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

That's right. Bread. Nothing more. Nothing less. A simple substance for a hungry people to take and eat. This is God's offering in the wilderness, and it certainly seems to have caught these folks off guard. Maybe it's because they never expected to survive the desert sands in the first place. Or, maybe it's because they had hoped God's provision would be a little more impressive—a banquet, perhaps, or a five-course meal. Whatever the people's expectations, God's reality is not only more surprising; it is also more transformative.

You might recall that God's instruction from here is that the people gather just enough to get them through the day. Rather than showering them with food to fill their stomachs and their Tupperware, too, God provides measured portions to sustain the people and—as importantly—to teach them how to trust. Each day, God surprises Israel afresh, scattering manna as a simple reminder of God's everyday blessings. While the people may have been waiting for an

³ Terence E. Fretheim. *Interpretation: Exodus*. Edited by James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991.

extraordinary answer to their uncertainty and suffering, God's immediate response is far more mundane.

What is it? Bread in the wilderness. It's not what the people expected, nor is it what they thought they would need. In a surprising twist, it's even better. It's the simple promise of God's sure presence and provision with each passing day, an invitation to trust, taste, and see.

Like the Israelites, we have a way of allowing life's widest stretches of wilderness to limit what we believe is possible. I've fallen into this habit. I would guess you have, too. When the way before us appears barren, it is hard to imagine how God could be at work. When we've lost our sense of direction, when we come up against our bodies' limits, when a relationship seems too far gone, when our addictions consume so much of our capacity, when the pandemic keeps spinning off new unknowns, when peace and justice feel ever more elusive, our expectations may grow limited, as we wonder what good could possibly come. In those moments of uncertainty or despair, it can be tempting to tighten our expectations and turn back toward something more predictable, stable, and safe.

But those moments are also when we are poised for the greatest surprise. Recall for a moment that Duke Divinity professor, Kate Bowler. Across the wilderness of tests and treatments, she has continued to write and speak about how God has surprised her, not with some sweeping cure, but with everyday sustenance. Mornings spent making coffee and French toast. The sound of her son's first words. Friends who don't try to fix things or fumble for a reason. Daily bread for an impossible journey.

Contrary to what we might expect, God does God's best work in the wilderness. In the dark, in-between places where fear and doubt dwell, that is where God has a history of showing up. Out of the wild chaos, God creates earth and sky, mountains and rivers, plants and animals, and all of us. When Sarah and Abraham are deep creased with age, God promises to make their descendants more numerous than the stars. While Jesus' followers are fearfully huddled in an upper room, he walks in with words of peace. He offers himself as bread. God doesn't create the conditions that lead to chaos and despair but is active through them to tend and to provide.

In the wilderness, where our imaginations are often at their most limited, God catches us by surprise, meeting us again and again with gifts that are as ordinary as they are unexpected. And with every unanticipated occasion, there is wonder; there is delight; there is even joy. So, let us prepare to be surprised.