

SURPRISED BY GOD'S PEOPLE

Psalm 126

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Have you ever been surprised by someone? Not the surprise when someone jumps out in front of you and shouts “Boo!” in order to startle or scare you. But the kind of surprise that catches you off guard with joy? A surprise that brings spontaneous, healing laughter? A surprise that fills your heart with so much love you think you’ll burst? A surprise that makes you smile with delight and might even cause you to giggle?

An unexpected gift from a loved one.

A puppy leaping in your lap and raining kisses all over your face.

A surprise birthday party from your dearest friends.

A funny story from someone who rarely tells jokes, but made the attempt just to cheer you up.

A hug of forgiveness when you thought you’d go to bed hurt and angry.

Have you ever been surprised, even amazed, by another person’s actions?

Do you ever see God in the middle of those surprises?

Sometimes we resist surprises. We resist joy. We resist laughter. But God is persistent. God pushes through our stoic calm, that stiff upper lip, and spills joy into our laps whether we want it or not.

Let’s try an experiment. Turn to someone near you. Choose one of you to be serious, and one to be funny. Now, I’m going to give you 20 seconds. I want the funny person to try and make the serious person laugh. The serious person must try to resist laughing if at all possible. Ready, Go!

How many of you broke down and laughed? What did that person do that made you give in and smile, or laugh? How did this person break through your resistance? And did you feel better for letting go and laughing with them?

This morning we’re going to look at the topic of surprises. How people can surprise us as God works through them. Surprises can make us laugh or cry. Surprise can terrify us. Surprises can delight us. Surprise can open us up to God in ways we never expected. Let’s explore how God works through surprise.

Let's read Psalm 126 together. (Please stand)

Psalm 126

A Pilgrim Song

1-3 It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when GOD returned Zion's exiles.

We laughed, we sang,
we couldn't believe our good fortune.

We were the talk of the nations—

"GOD was wonderful to them!"

GOD was wonderful to us;
we are one happy people.

4-6 And now, GOD, do it again—

bring rains to our drought-stricken lives

So those who planted their crops in despair

will shout hurrahs at the harvest,

So those who went off with heavy hearts

will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.

Verses 1 and 2 of this Psalm talk about an incredible event that actually happened in the lives of the people who first wrote this song. Israel had been sent in to exile, they had been sent in to captivity. Because of their unfaithfulness to God serious punishments happened in the life of the nation. They lost their country. Now, think about how rare an event this is. They lost their country and yet after a period of long years God leads them back. What an amazing event. How seldom this happens. After years, God leads them back and it describes their response. As they are walking back in to their native land, they are like people who are in a dream. Don't wake me up, this is too good to be true. They actually experience this. This is part of what their joy is all about. They really saw God work in their lives. And so, part of joy is real experience, real events, events that have dates on them, that are a part of history and part of our own story.

The beginning of Psalm 126 tells us of a people who are surprised by a God who lets them come home. They were unfaithful. They were carried off into exile. They lost their identity as a people. But now, years later, God is turning it all around. They are coming home. God has forgiven them. It seems like a dream. God still wants to be at work in their lives. Amazing!

Has God ever surprised you through forgiveness? Through a coming home experience you didn't deserve? Filled your heart with an unexpected joy that felt like a dream?

After ten years of marriage, Cindy and Chip Altemos were in the long process of getting a divorce. The proverbial baggage they brought from previous marriages seemed too great to overcome, so they separated and even agreed to date other people.

Five years into the painful separation, Chip was in the hospital with kidney failure. With his health deteriorating rapidly, his soon-to-be ex-wife came to his aid—in spite of Chip being in another relationship at the time.

"He was still my husband. There was no way I could walk around with two kidneys, and he had none," Cindy told the press. "It was the right thing to do." She agreed to donate a kidney, telling Chip there were no strings attached—no written agreement concerning a better share in divorce court.

The transplant took place on February 21, 2007, and a funny thing happened as they both recovered in the hospital: they fell back in love. Chip thought to himself, *Why would I want to date someone else, when I have a woman who would give part of herself so I can keep living?* He put an end to his other relationship and asked Cindy to come back home with him. The two will be married 17 years in October. (Sam McKee, Sunnyvale, California; source: Associated Press, "Kidney Saves Marriage," www.foxnews.com (5-6-07))

Has God ever surprised you through the love of another person? A person you'd argued with, hurt deeply, wasn't sure you'd ever forgive . . . and then, surprise, a miracle? Hearts that came home, nested in the love of God.

Verse 3 of Psalm 126 is the present tense. We are right now filled with joy. That's what comes out in Verse 3. God has done amazing things for us and so we are filled with joy.

God wants to surprise us right now, in the present. God's faithfulness was wrapped around our past and walks with us into the present. When we take the time to rehearse the joy, the God-surprises of our past, then we can begin to share that joy in the present. We might be the ones to surprise someone else.

Pastor Angel Nava of Semillas de Vida, a church here in La Paz, was driving by Ciudad de Los Ninos on Cinco de Febrero and felt compelled to stop. He didn't understand why. I mean, after all, this was a Catholic orphanage and he was a Protestant pastor . . . why would God send him there? He went inside the doors and asked to speak to the priest in charge. He introduced himself and asked if there was anything his church could do for the children. Needless to say, the priest was surprised. It wasn't everyday that a Protestant Pastor crossed his threshold. He told Pastor Nava that the kids needed shoes. So Pastor Nava returned to his church with a list of kids and their shoe sizes, and asked families in his church to buy shoes for Catholic orphans. Not only did they agree, but his congregation got enthusiastically behind the project. They wrapped each pair of shoes in beautifully decorated boxes.

It was then that Pastor Nava decided to take a risk. He asked the priest if he and the children would come and attend one of their Sunday worship services so that the families could have a personal connection with the kids. Another surprise. The priest agreed. On this particular Sunday, the priest and the children were honored during the worship service. All the decorated boxes of shoes were stacked to overflowing on a nearby table. There were balloons and special refreshments to share at the conclusion of the service.

And then, another surprise. Pastor Nava felt convicted that he and the members of his church should kneel and wash the feet of this priest and these children as an act of service and love through Jesus Christ. Speechless, the priest nodded. He and the children were seated and then members of the church came and removed their sandals, bathed their dusty feet, and served them in the name of Christ.

Has God ever surprised you through people in the church? As a result of this experience, Pastor Angel Nava began to work with the Protestant Minister's Council to organize an ecumenical day of prayer for the City of La Paz. This was the event we experienced last Saturday night. 1000 people gathered. Protestants and Roman Catholics gathered in the same place, worshiping God. Our amazing God is just full of surprises! And some of these surprises are unfolding right now, right in front of us, today, in the present. Unspeakable joy!

So surprise and joy has a past tense, a present tense, and then the Psalmist shows us joy in the future tense. The Psalmist looks towards the future by using two images. The first comes out when he says, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev." (NIV) The image used here is of a dry streambed, one that is dry for much of the year, but when rains happen all of a sudden it becomes a

coursing brook and then because of the water there is an explosion of color and life on the sides as plants grow up and flower because of the water coming through the stream. We who live in the desert of La Paz know exactly what this means. Dry arroyos fill with rain water, the water recedes and desert flowers bloom in abundance, green carpets the sandy floors.

It is an image of restoration. Of God pouring out his blessings, his favor, in a way that is beyond anything we can imagine or manufacture on our own. We joyfully anticipate it. Look forward to the promise of new color and life blooming, exploding around us.

But this restoration does not come without pain, without cost. It doesn't expect that things are going to be easy, that there won't be difficulty and trouble because that is the second image. The second image is "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with joy, carrying the sheaves with him."

There is no lack of realism here. The people are looking to the future filled with joy, but still knowing that there is a lot of hard work ahead. There is a lot of suffering ahead. There is a lot of heat, hard work, and setbacks. But God is at work in it and it will bear fruit.

And so that's part of our joy too: the confidence that in whatever difficulties we face in the future, God will be there. We might have to face some things that are extremely challenging and that produce sorrow in our lives, that sorrow will come, but we also believe that we serve a God that knows how to dry tears. We serve a God that knows how to bring fruit from the difficult times of life. We serve a God that is dependable as we take those steps of following Jesus and staying close and taking risks that God will be there just as he was in the past. He will be there in the future and part of that confidence is that pain will never drive out the joy.

Let me share a final story of how God brought surprise, restored joy, to a group of Christians in the Republic of Georgia. This area of the world used to be part of the Soviet Union, but is now an independent country sandwiched between Russia and Turkey. Listen for the redemptive surprises through God's people in this story.

Following the collapse of communism, the Orthodox Church in Georgia sought to recapture a place of prominence and dominance it had during the time of the Czars. Protestant expressions of Christianity were labeled as "sects." One extremist priest, Father Basil Mkalavishvili, gathered followers with a call to put down these sects. A number of Baptist churches were burned. Non-orthodox pastors and priests

were beaten. In March 2002 the Bible Society warehouse, in a Baptist facility, was torched. Charred Bibles were salvaged from the ruins. Then, on January 24, 2003, Father Basil led a group of his followers on a violent attack of a united Christian service held at the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi to observe the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The organizers of the service told the worshippers to disperse before the service began, lessening the number of victims beaten in the attack.

In November 2003 a new government was ushered in and Father Basil was finally arrested for his violent acts in March 2004. In November of 2004 he went on trial with nine of his followers. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia was called to testify. For three hours, Bishop Malkhaz spoke about the values of Christianity, the ecumenical movement and religious liberty as well as about the attack on his church.

The judge and prosecutor asked many questions about difference among Christians and about the distinctive features of the Georgian Baptist Church. At the end of his presentation the judge asked Malkhaz, “What do you wish for these people who persecuted you?” Malkhaz replied, “I demand that these people are pardoned and released from prison.”

Everyone in the court was shocked at his statement. Defense lawyers quickly asked for clarification. Malkhaz said his absolution was without condition, explaining that this was the nature of Christian love and forgiveness. Finally, since nobody could accept what he’d said, Malkhaz added, “I do not demand anything from them except the red wine which we will drink together when they are set free.” (Georgians love their wine, including the Baptists!) The courtroom erupted in laughter.

Malkhaz then ignored the rules of the court and walked over to the cage where the prisoners were held to shake their hands, including the hand of Father Basil. As he left the courtroom, a boy tugged on his sleeve and said, “Thank you.” It was Basil’s grandson, whom Malkhaz then blessed. That evening he received a message from the prisoners, “Even if we are not released from here, we will be forever grateful to you.”

A few days later Malkhaz wrote to President Saakashvili calling for the release of those who had persecuted him and the Baptists. At a worship service the next Sunday, Malkhaz shared, “In the past we were praying that Father Basil was arrested; now we are praying that he is released from jail.” Despite Malkhaz’s call

for a pardon, Father Basil was sentenced to six years in prison, with his associates receiving lesser punishments.

How far are you willing to go to love your enemies? Do you believe in the surprising power of God's love to transform people, even to transform your enemies? God can surprise through the actions and love of many people. These surprises open us up to the healing grace, transforming mercy, and the strengthening joy of Christ.

Did you know that God can surprise people in wonderful ways through you? Last week we had 8 people visit from 7 different churches in Indiana. They listened to stories from our partners in the Mexican Baptist Churches, and to stories from many of you at Crossroads. They were touched, surprised, overcome with tears and joy after spending only one day among Christians in La Paz. You can be a God-surprise in someone else's life. Yes, even you!

David and I minister with International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches. The theme for the World Mission Offering this year is *Being Surprised by God's People*. I'd like to close this morning by showing a 3 minute DVD of how God is surprising us through people all around the world.

Resources:

Sermon on Joy by Rev. John Schmidt. 2005. Central Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD 21204 410/823-6145 www.centralpc.org

Adult Study by American Baptist Missionary Dan Buttry, "Be Surprised by God's People!" 2008. Story of Bishop Malkhaz. www.worldmissionoffering.org

Story of Ministering to Catholic Priest & Children narrated in person by Pastor Angel Nava of Semillas de Vida, La Paz, Mexico. September 2008. Reeds' Living Room.

The Psalms. A Commentary by Artur Weiser. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1962.