

Surprise, Surprise, Surprise

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Bravo Sunday, June 14, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Genesis 18:1-15](#)

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Who would have thought that a story about a 90-year-old and a 100-year-old would make good sermon fodder on a Sunday when we celebrate graduates? Not, me, I'll tell you. Still, since this is one of the four readings assigned for this second Sunday after Pentecost, I decided to look at it a little more closely and – well, as Gomer Pyle once said, “Surprise, surprise, surprise.”

Actually, that's the aspect of the story that I think makes it meaningful for all of us and especially for our graduates. Gomer might have said, “surprise,” three times, but I count at least four surprises in this passage, and each one of them has something to teach, each of them offers an encouraging word.

The first surprise comes when Abraham looks up and suddenly sees three people standing there. Out in the wilderness, it was probably unlikely for a group of three to be able just sneak up on somebody (unless, perhaps, they were meaning to do harm). I would think it would be especially hard to sneak up on somebody who's just sitting around in the heat of the day, taking shelter in the shade of their tent. These three showing up must have been a surprise for Abraham. His reaction to the surprising strangers was not to respond to their presence with fear. His reaction was to treat them with hospitality. He invites them to rest, to soothe their feet in some water, and to take a morsel to eat.

So here's the lesson I get from this first surprise: we are called to hospitality as we journey through life. We are called to be hospitable to family, friends, and strangers alike.

The second surprise is that Abraham servants must have had a microwave. Abraham might have said his surprise guest should have a morsel to eat, but he gave them a feast – and unless his servants had a microwave, I don't see how they could have butchered a calf and roasted it as quickly as it appears to happen in the story.

Of course, I don't think they really had a microwave, so perhaps there is a different lesson for us in the surprise of how quickly the feast was prepared. And here's the lesson I glean: sometimes what appears impossible is possible. Or, as Nelson Mandela put it, “It always seems impossible until it's done.” We all encounter mountains that seem impossible to climb as we journey through our lives. Remember that what seems impossible is often possible and can be done.

The third surprise is perhaps the most obvious one: the surprise pregnancy that the strangers announced. Now I want to be clear to our high school graduates and to their parents that I'm not suggesting anybody rush out and get pregnant. But I do want us all to think about creativity. There is, I think, no greater act of human creativity than the act of creating life.

The story of Sarah getting pregnant and of Sarah and Abraham becoming parents is a story that reminds me that as stewards of God's creation we are called to partner with

God in the very act of creativity. Whenever we are bringing forth something new into the universe – be it art or research or building or design – we are acting in the image and likeness of God. This is true for all of us and especially important for our graduates to remember as they step deeper into their full selves and further along the pathway to independence.

The fourth surprise is a surprise that Abraham and Sarah do not appear to recognize. The fourth surprise is that one of the three surprise visitors is actually God. I'm glad they don't recognize God, at least not at this point in the story. This surprise reminds me both that God is always around and that we will not always recognize God's presence. It is reassuring to me to be reminded that God is present. And it is reassuring to me to know that the great matriarch and patriarch of our faith sometimes missed that reality. We do not need to be perfect. We do not need to be perfect in our work. We do not need to be perfect in our faith. Instead of being called to be perfect, we are called to be faithful. And that is something we can all do.

While our tradition on Bravo Sunday is to focus on the high school graduates from our congregation at this service, I want to take a moment to acknowledge a college graduation. I was informed that Nathan Sojourner graduated from Chabot College with history and liberal arts transfer certificates in May. He will be attending Cal State East Bay in the Fall semester and majoring in history.

Congratulations to Nathan!

And now, let's turn to these two: Megan Keesis and Hanna Adamson.