

## “God works in surprising ways – today” – Pastor Paul Matheson

1 Cor. 12:12-31a; Luke 34:14-21 (January 23, 2022)



A few years ago, Lindsay had a significant birthday. Of course *all* birthdays are significant, but this was a big one and we wanted to mark it in a special way.

So our family planned a surprise party. We decided we’d take her out for dinner. Then, afterward, we’d go home to discover a houseful of waiting guests who would jump up and shout “surprise!”

The children did an excellent job of keeping everything secret. Lindsay did not suspect a thing.

We went to the restaurant, ordered a meal. And when the waiter came round, we all agreed that we’d had enough and now we would go home.

All but *one* of our children, who seemed to forget the plan we had so carefully put in place. We were supposed to arrive at a specific time. And that time was now.

But this child, who shall remain nameless, seemed to be mesmerized by the desert menu. His eyes grew big, his attention clearly focused. “I’d like some of this dessert,” he said.

The rest of us discreetly shook our heads. “No - no desert, remember?” But of course we couldn’t say anything.

And next thing you know, Lindsay decided she’d have dessert as well, just to keep him company. We rolled our eyes.

Well then, desert it was going to be. Even though there was cake and ice cream and a crowd of people waiting patiently for our arrival.

Fortunately, when we did get back to the house, the people were still there, though a little confused about what time we’d arranged. So the party, despite some anxious moments, went ahead *almost* as advertised. And it turned out to be a great success.



In these weeks of Epiphany we’re looking at the surprising work of God. And if you remember last week’s surprise, it was turning water into wine. God brings amazing *transformation* to our lives, we said. And sometimes that can happen even at the very *end* of the day, when many of us have given up hope of anything ever taking place.

This week we have another surprise. And I don't know if I should give it away so early in the game or not ... Well, here goes. Are you ready?

God is at work in this very moment. Here and now.

And why is this a surprise, you ask?

Well first let me tell you the story about Jesus returning to his home-town. And the sermon he preached there. And then we'll consider why the folks might have been surprised by what he had to say. And why *we* might also be surprised to hear it.



Jesus had just begun his ministry. 40 days earlier, or thereabouts, he'd been baptized in the Jordan River. Then, after successfully negotiating a time of great temptation, he returned to his home in Galilee. To the very village where he'd grown up.

We're told that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. And that wherever he went he would teach in the synagogues. And that at Nazareth too he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his custom.



So imagine Jesus now in familiar surroundings, together with friends and family and people who had known him since he was a little boy. They were glad to have him back.

But *this* Jesus was not the same person they remembered. This Jesus was temptation-tested and Spirit-filled. This Jesus was committed to the life of God's kingdom, as they would soon discover.

It was the custom in those days, that an honoured guest be invited to read. So Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it to the place where he found these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he began to read. Well yes, the Spirit was *indeed* upon Jesus, just as the Spirit had settled upon the prophet before him.

"He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."



All beautiful words. No doubt familiar to those who heard them. To folks who'd been attending synagogue for years. They'd listened to the sacred writings. And heard the Rabbi's debate their meaning.

Now they watched as Jesus rolled up the scroll and sat down to teach. Sitting was a common stance that teachers used when expounding upon the passage.

He took his place. And everyone waited to hear what Jesus would say.

Let me warn you, this may be the shortest sermon you've ever listened to! I suppose you could say that Jesus let the scripture do the talking. His own words were brief and directly to the point.

“Today,” he said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That's it. The sum total of his message. Oh, there may have been more. But that's what's been remembered. That's what sunk in.



This week Idena posted one of *my* sermons on the website. She told me there was a place for a description but she wasn't sure what to say about it.

Which is always a bad sign. I think you should be able to sum up the thrust of a preacher's message in a sentence, or two at the most. And if you can't, well you'd better send the preacher back to the study.

So what was the sum of Jesus' message?

It was, “Today”. Today all these things are happening: Good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind. Today is the year of God's favour. Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Today.



So now you've got the gist of *my* message too.

But it was a surprising thing for people to hear. And here's the reason.



Over centuries the Hebrew people recorded their story. Wrote down everything they wanted to remember about their walk with God. The times and places where God had appeared to them in powerful ways. They kept their hymns, their songs, their poems. A record of their liturgy. Books of the law. Proclamations of prophets who spoke on God's behalf.

“Heilsgeschichte” – am I saying that correctly? Or is it an English massacre of a fine German word? Maybe someone can correct me.

Sacred story, holy history.



Of course, we too have writings and memories, in *addition* to those of the Hebrew people. We have gospels and letters, and stories of the early church, and memories of its leaders. For 2000 years Christians have been doing this.

I found out late last week this is Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.

On January 21, 1525, our Anabaptist forebears gathered for a secret worship service in Zurich, Switzerland. In that service they agreed to baptize each other as adults upon their own confessions of faith.

Early Anabaptists understood this act to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit, a commitment to daily discipleship, and membership in the new community of God's people.

It's absolutely worth remembering!



But here's the crunch. The faith of Jesus is *more* than what has gone *before*. The new wine of the Kingdom is always bursting the old wineskins that try to contain it. It stretches and challenges and breaks and reforms. It's not just about the *past*.

The faith of Jesus is about a living God whose work *continues* to break in upon us.

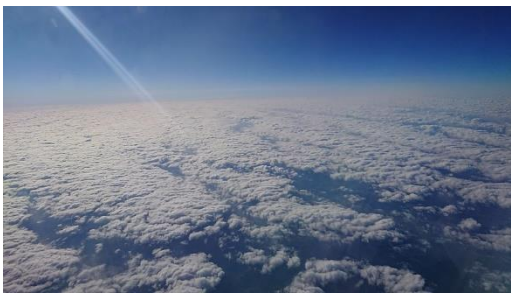
"Today," he said, "these scriptures are being fulfilled in your hearing."

It was a shock for people to think that Jesus could be so *bold*. That he could witness to God's work in the present tense. That this hometown boy would have the audacity to say that it was happening in him.

Well think about that. We might be surprised to hear it too!



The other thing we Christians sometimes do is project all of God's work into the *future*.



We focus on heaven. On the dawning of the new creation.

Some even draw charts and make predictions of when Jesus will return and make it so. Kind of like a weather forecast for Christians.

I guess you know such forecasts aren't very accurate. Even these past few weeks we've heard warnings about storms that fizzled. (Though if we get freezing rain today, I guess that will be nasty.)



Future vision is a wonderful thing. And Jesus *did* speak of a kingdom still to come. He pointed to the dawning of a bright new world.

But the reason he did that is not so we could sit back and speculate. He did it to invite us in.

“Come, live this life! Be my disciples. Let the future begin to be. Let it come among us even now.

“Let Good News be given to the poor. Let captives be released. Let those of us who are blind begin to see. Let all who bear the heavy weight of oppression upon their shoulders – let them find their freedom. Know that this is the year of God’s favour.”

Those were powerful words for those who heard them first. And they continue to be so. “Today, these scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today.

| JANUARY 2022 |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| SUN          | MON | TUE | WED | THU | FRI | SAT |
|              |     |     |     |     |     | 1   |
| 2            | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   |
| 9            | 10  | 11  | 12  | 13  | 14  | 15  |
| 16           | 17  | 18  | 19  | 20  | 21  | 22  |
| 23           | 24  | 25  | 26  | 27  | 28  | 29  |
| 30           | 31  |     |     |     |     |     |

Holidays and Observances: 1: New Year's Day, 17: Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Wiki Calendar



Can we accept this *surprising* work of God?

*Here and now* God is wanting to be at work in our lives. It’s not just a matter of the *past*, memories that we treasure. And it’s not just a matter of *future* hopes that we cling to.

It *is* those things, don’t get me wrong. But it is so much more.

It is who we are today. It is the Spirit of God that sweeps in upon us, and transforms us. Wakes us up, opens our eyes, takes our hand, heals our wounds, invites us on the journey of discipleship.



Lindsay tells me that the church she attended as a little girl had these words written in bold letters at the front: “Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.” She says those words brought a sense of urgency to the message she heard in that little congregation.

It’s easy for us to ignore things, or put them off. To say, “Oh well, maybe another day.” And before we know it the moment is passed, the day is gone.

Hear this Good News! God is wanting to breathe life into us in this time and place. Among this people. The Spirit is moving. God’s favour is present in great abundance.

*I'm* always surprised when I hear it. And when I ponder about what it might mean for my life.

I wonder what it could mean for *your* life?

If you've got a pen or pencil, and your bulletin handy, maybe jot something down. Just a word or two. Or take a moment with God in silent prayer.

What might God be wanting to work in your life? Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Today.

I'd be glad to hear how the Spirit is moving. I hope you'll tell someone.

May the grace that comes to us in Jesus fill us with gratitude for what is past. Hope for what is still to come. And new life with a living God in this present moment. Amen.