

A God Full of Surprises
Romans Summer Sermon Series – August 26th, 2007

Series: Extreme Make Over
Text: Romans 11:1-2; 25-32

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on August 26th, 2007 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.

Most of you don't even know the story of Ainsley's birth. Ainsley was conceived by In Vitro Fertilization. I was unable to get pregnant. Then because of the way she was conceived as well as my age and my blood pressure I was referred to a high risk doctor. As a part of normal operating procedures for high risk pregnancies I had weekly appointments and non-stress tests during the last trimester. My appointments were normally on Mondays, but this particular week toward the end of May they couldn't get me in on Monday so I was scheduled for Thursday. Chris rarely came with me to these appointments because they were routine. But for reasons I no longer remember Chris went with me to the doctor that Thursday. While we were sitting all hooked up to the machine that was listening to Ainsley's heartbeat, her heartbeat went from 150 bpm to 90 bpm. After about 30 seconds it went back up. But the nurse was concerned and called the doctor in. Her heartbeat went down again. The doctor decided to admit me and try to induce labor and see how she handled the stress. While I was talking to the doctors after being admitted suddenly there were four nurses surrounding me and moving the monitor. Ainsley's heartbeat had gone under 70 bpm. My doctor came in and said he just felt like we needed to take her via c-section. Within 15 minutes I was in surgery and Ainsley had arrived. Ainsley was healthy and happy and wanted nothing more than to be held all the time.

What the doctor told us the next day was that her umbilical cord was flattened because it was under her head and that if he hadn't done a c-section to take her the day before it would have been too late. I would have gone to the office the next day because I hadn't felt her move and she would not have survived.

Was it coincidence or was it divine appointment that my schedule changed and placed me at the doctor on a day that was different from my usual schedule? I do not pretend to know the answer to that question, but I have come to respect the saying which someone sent me: *Coincidence is simply God's way of remaining anonymous.*

Through both personal and professional experience I have come to the growing conviction that the God whom we worship is a *God Full of Surprises*. Our scripture lesson for this morning is but a case in point.

In chapters 9 and 10 of Romans, Paul has come down pretty hard on his own Jewish ancestry. Even though he had been a faithful Jew, and even though he knew in his heart that faithful Jews were zealous for God, he has been upset in the preceding chapters because he senses that their zeal was misdirected. Rather than leading them into a stronger relationship with God, it was leading instead into a more scrupulous observance of the Law. Attention to Law and not to the relationship God offers us in the person of Jesus Christ had become the focus of their religious faith.

Moreover, faithful Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They did not believe that by choosing to follow him and accepting him as a personal savior and lord of their lives, they could experience more powerfully the faith of their ancestral heritage.

So Paul has been harsh on the Jews and welcoming to the Gentiles, but Paul doesn't want the Gentiles in Rome to get the wrong idea. Paul does not believe that God has given up on the Jews. He is not favoring one over the other. He wants them both, and he is going to get them by whatever means necessary.

Let me quickly point out three surprises in this passage I have shared with you: 1) A New Way to Deal with our Unfaithfulness; 2) An Inclusive Way to Welcome All who Trust Him; 3) A Determined Way to Accomplish God's Purposes.

A New Way to Deal with Our Unfaithfulness

It is a normal human response to want to hurt someone who has hurt you; to reject someone who has rejected you; to turn a cold shoulder to someone who has turned a cold shoulder on you. All of these are normal human responses. However, Paul says none of these are God's response to Israel's unfaithfulness. I love the way Peterson translates verse 2: *God has been too long involved with Israel, has too much invested, to simply wash his hands of them.*

A pastoral colleague tells the story of visiting one of his parishioners at his place of business, and he did what most of us who visit do to get to know our people better. He saw a picture of a husband and wife in a gentleman's office, and said, "Nice picture. When was it taken?" When he turned around and looked at the man, he had tears in his eyes. So he asked him, "Why are you crying?"

He said, "There was a time in our marriage when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt and injured she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing I did not deserve for her to answer in the affirmative, I asked her to forgive me. And she forgave me.

"This picture was taken shortly after that. When I see this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me in this picture. So when you see this picture you say, 'Nice picture.' But when I see this picture I see my life given back to me again." (Citation: Randy Frazee, pastor of Pantego Bible Church, Fort Worth, Texas, from sermon preached 6-24-01, "Uncommon Confessions")

Paul says God is not about to give up on Israel even though Israel rejected God's only son. God has too much invested in Israel to give up on her. That is Surprise #1.

An Inclusive Way to Welcome All who Trust Him

Paul also says that God does not play favorites anymore. God's original plan was to establish His Kingdom on the earth through the nation of Israel. When Israel was not faithful to its covenant promise, God sent Jesus into the world to build a bridge between Him and those who had failed. God's plan was to save the Israelites and allow them to establish the rule of God on the earth. The Old Testament story is of Israel's unfaithfulness to God's plan over and over again.

The New Testament story is about God recognizing that Israel is unable to keep its end of the contract, so God changes the contract through Jesus Christ. God includes the Gentiles, as well. Because of the hardness of the hearts of those with whom God had made the original contract, the Kingdom loses its exclusivity. Surprise #2: God's intention is to rescue all of humankind by raising Jesus from the dead. So whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you can understand inclusive love.

It reminds me of a story I heard the other day about a young boy who went to the local store with his mother. The shop owner, a kindly man, allowed children to take a handful of hard candies with them as they helped their parents shop. He passed the boy a large jar of suckers and invited him to help himself to a handful. Uncharacteristically, the boy held back.

So the shop owner reached in and pulled out a handful for him. When outside, the boy's mother asked why he had suddenly been so shy and wouldn't take a handful of suckers when offered. The boy replied, "Because his hand is much bigger than mine!"

This is what Paul believes. God's hand of saving grace is always so much bigger than our hand. So we need to be careful about who we exclude from God's love because they do not conform to some standard that we find it difficult to keep ourselves. We cannot limit those to whom God will choose to offer love because they don't fit our image.

A Determined Way to Accomplish God's Purposes

There is one final surprise in this text. God is Determined to Accomplish His Purpose. God will do whatever it takes to find a way to accomplish what is right and good for God's people.

God confounds the way we think about who is in and who is out. He hardens the hearts of those who think they are in and softens the hearts of those who think they are out. The saving grace of Jesus changes the order of things. Those who are lost become found, and those who are certain of God's favor become lost. God expands the offer of salvation beyond the Jews so that not just the Jews, but all of us, might find the depth, breadth, and height of God's love.

While I was working on my doctorate, one of the classes I was required to take was multi-cultural ministry. One of the requirements was to attend a worship service of a culture different to our own. I found a African American Methodist Episcopal church and became friends with the pastor there. She and her husband invited me to attend their 25th wedding anniversary. It started in the sanctuary of the church. At the end of the ceremony my friend and her husband participated in an old African American custom called "Jumping the Broom." The custom dates from the days when black people were considered property. They were allowed to give birth to children because the more slaves the better for the slave owner, but they were not allowed to marry or to form attachments because families could not always be sold. So they could serve as slaves at weddings, but they could not have their own wedding traditions.

However, in spite of their oppressors, God found a way to maintain the sanctity of marriage. When a couple wanted to acknowledge that they were committed to one another and married in the sight of God, they would lay a broom down, and in the presence of family and friends they would jump the broom. Even though the state would not honor the legality of their marriage, and even though the church would not allow them to be married (and shame on us for not giving them a safe haven).

As the pastor invited my friends to honor their African-American heritage, he reminded all of us that love never fails, that God always finds a way to accomplish what God wants to accomplish; and that God wasn't going to allow a little thing like the institution of slavery to keep those who wanted to express their love and fidelity to one another to do so.

God will always find a way to accomplish what God wants to accomplish in his people. It was not lost on me that I was one of the only two white people in that sanctuary. It was not lost on me that my African American brothers and sisters had a ritual for something that we need to celebrate more in our Caucasian community. It was not lost on me that if marriages in today's world are to work they require more than erotic love, and more than filial affection. They require the kind of commitment, care, and faith that African American slaves had to exhibit without the support of state or church to accomplish it.

God always accomplishes what God chooses to accomplish. His is a determined way.

Conclusion

A new way to deal with unfaithfulness. An inclusive way to welcome all who place their trust in him. A determined way to accomplish His purposes. Is not the God we worship a God full of surprises?