



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

May 2, 2021

**The Surprising Acts
of God IV:
Make Yourself at Home**

Dr. Jo Forrest

**The Surprising Acts
of God IV: Make Yourself
at Home**

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2021 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 6, 2021

The Surprising Acts of God IV: Make Yourself at Home

In the prior weeks of the “Surprising Acts of God,” we explored the healing performed through the apostles, giving new life to those long burdened, and wreaking havoc with some fiefdoms.

Today we turn to Paul’s ministry for a story of twists and turns as he takes the gospel to distant shores. We sense the spirit at work within him as he wrestles with himself before taking risks for God’s will to unfold.

Before I read this holy text, please pray with me.

God of tender touch and surprising encounters, your spirit compelled so many in the past to open their hearts and homes to you, changing the course of their lives and ours. As we read these words, may your spirit startle us with wonder and delight, encouraging us to greet others and encounter you. Amen.

Acts 16:9-15

⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city for some days.

¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

After more than a year of COVID, I think we all can tell stories of our well-laid plans being thrown into the wind. A vacation overseas or a visit to relatives across town vanished.

And, I hope from the past year, your memories will linger of a joy in the unanticipated, alternate destinations explored, and new people encountered in quarantine – Zoom, or Facetime, or walks in the neighborhood.

If we ever felt in control of our destiny, COVID schooled us in humility and openness.

The Surprising Acts of God IV: Make Yourself at Home

Our faith history contains a steady drumbeat of stories about our ancestors who had all good intentions for their lives and homes only to experience upheaval and renewal.

Along the way God surprises them by holding them close. Their stories teach us how to live with such openness to the spirit.

From the beginning, the childless and aged Abraham and Sarah settled into at their ancestral homeland only for God to promise Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

Trusting in God, Abraham uprooted the entire tribe and set out to a foreign land.

In the biblical language of hospitality, God invites them to be God's guest in another land that God prepared. They will still be at home in God.

At another time, while resting from day's heat, three strangers appear at Abraham's tent. In keeping with the ancient Bedouin practices, he welcomes them, serves a fine meal, and in return receives a divine message; his wife will bear a son.

Extending hospitality creates a welcome space for everyone around the table to experience God's word to unfold.

It is not that God's word cannot be heard in barren, hostile circumstances. God is not so limited, but we are. Fear shuts us down. A good meal, comfy chair fosters dialogue.

The Book of Hebrews reminds us of this encounter with “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Generations later, Abraham’s descendants fled Egypt, were refugees, wandering in the desert, at the mercy of those who inhabited the land.

As a result, the Biblical laws always require them to deal justly and compassionately with the strangers among them.

“You shall also love the stranger,” God instructs Moses.

Our ancient ancestors practiced hospitality out of gratitude for God’s persistent care, in honor of Father Abraham’s example, and from their own painful memories of refugee life.¹

At the core, to practice hospitality is to see the face of God in the stranger. To be open to people and a world beyond our confines invites God to inhabit our imaginations and surprise us as we become agents of God’s love.

Make no mistake, to practice hospitality demands taking risks. Our hearts will never be the same again.

¹ So many articles inspired my thinking about the simple gift of hospitality and often repeated themes and Biblical references, most notable, Mary W. Anderson “Hospitality Theology,” *The Christian Century*, July 1-8, 1998 and Jody B. Fleming “Spiritual Generosity: Biblical hospitality in the story of Lydia (Acts:16:14-16, 40), *Missiology: An International Review* 2019, Vol 47(1) 51-63, and Ana Maria Pineda “Hospitality” in *Practicing our Faith*, Ed, Dorothy C. Bass, (San Francisco: John Wiley & Son, 1997).

The Surprising Acts of God IV: Make Yourself at Home

As a faithful Jew, Paul grew up with and taught these stories of altered courses and outsiders embraced.

So, when he sets out for the frontier of Macedonia, to see a man, he should not be surprised to be diverted not once, but twice, from his plotted course before finally landing in Philippi and encountering a woman, not a man.

The town Philippi rested on the coast as a trade route for goods, accepting people of all nations and ideas.

Lydia is simply described as dealer in purple cloth. Unpacking this means she possessed wealth from her trade.

Since the only the royal and wealthy acquired such cloth, she must have honed a gravitas to speak with them. Imagine the intimacy one has with a dressmaker or tailor. And she managed her own household.

Lydia is truly extraordinary at that time.

Anyone hearing this story during the early second century would be struck at the scandal of their encounter.

Outside the confines of the city, her heart already open to God, through Paul's preaching, she embraces Christ.

The story has a subtle test for Paul. Once baptized Lydia insisted, he come to her home. Was it safe? To accept the invitation presented risks. To deny implied she was not really accepted into Christ's body.

Held by the grace of God, or maybe compelled by the spirit, he went.

From Lydia's hospitality Paul's mission and our church flourished. Without her open heart and Paul's confidence in her baptism truly making a wealthy, gentile woman, a part of Christ's body, he would not have found the safe harbor to nurture the global ministry.

This simple invitation to dinner became a game changing event in the life of the church.

Maybe it takes the disorientation of leaving home only to find it. Maybe it takes the vulnerability of seeking temporary shelter to experience God's care persist.

Maybe it takes opening your house to the stranger to truly make it a home.

Philippi, a port city, and crossroads for international trade reminded me of the story of the Canadian town of Gander, Newfoundland, and their welcome on September 11, 2001.

If you saw the musical, *Come from Away*, last year here in Pittsburgh or elsewhere, you may know the story.

After the attacks on the Twin Towers, US airspace was closed, and inbound international flights were re-routed.

The airstrip in Gander possessed the length for transcontinental aircraft but had not been used in recent decades.

The Surprising Acts of God IV: Make Yourself at Home

Thirty-eight flights appeared within a few hours, bringing seven thousand unexpected guests, whose presence about doubled the town's population.

Since the world turned upside down from planes flown into buildings, these passengers faced intense scrutiny passing through Canadian Customs and Immigration.

Once released, the passengers received the warmth that characterizes Gander. The residents in this small island refer to anyone from outside into the general description of "the come from aways," insist it is without prejudice, and marvel at the vastness of "away."

When it became clear that the "plane people" were going to be stranded for a few days, the community acted.

They opened spare bedrooms, created a casserole brigade, turned the local hockey rink into a freezer for food storage, and cared for the animals stranded on the planes.

The people of Gander showed extraordinary hospitality on one of the hardest days in our shared history. That part of the story is well known from the musical and myriad news stories.

Recently, the Rev. Cameron Trimble shared this personal story:

"A pastor who was in Gander during that experience told me about how the community leaders issued a call to bring any blankets residents could spare to the overflow shelters to keep people warm.

Most of the quilts were handmade, heirlooms they had inherited or created for future generations. Without hesitation, the citizens of Gander brought those quilts to keep the ‘plane people’ warm.

Five days later, when passengers packed up and prepared to reboard the planes, those who had donated the quilts told the ‘plane people’ to keep them, to take them with them as a remembrance of their meeting, and sign of their care. ²

Today, those quilts, beautifully stitched and lovingly gifted, are all over the world, still keeping people warm. They remind us that in the end, we are held together by the willingness *to be open to the one who comes from away.*

I imagine the residents of Gander as Lydia. Welcoming. Sharing their homes.

I imagine she sent Paul with provisions or a quilt, provided comfort and reminded him of her love. When he lingered in a distant prison cell, he wrote these words to the church in Philippi:

“I thank my God every time I remember you...because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me.”

We take tremendous risks every time we open our hearts to the spirit, take a new path, engage with a new individual.

² Cameron Trimble, “Gifts from the People of Gander: A Word for the Day,” *Piloting Faith*, March 3, 2021, <https://mailchi.mp/593246935afa/wcyrz8ckz9-10883410?e=47b2dd4a46>.

The Surprising Acts of God IV: Make Yourself at Home

Think of it as building resilience, in that at every juncture, faith grows stronger from both a willingness to rely upon God and God's ability to surprise us.

Coming out of quarantines, many of us are ready to embrace those we've missed during these isolating months.

We long for the intimacy of physically being with one another. Love them. Feed them. Soothe our souls. And we will emerge with varying degrees comfort as cautions for health persist.

As your pastor, I will not step into how engage, only to think broadly of with whom and why.

Is there another parent who helped when you wanted to tear your hair out over obtuse math homework or a teacher who went the extra mile for your kids?

Could you share a 'cuppa with the UPS guy who knows your hiding-space after all those Amazon deliveries? Or what about the neighbors you'd never known beyond a wave because you were both road warriors.

Friendly remains on the surface and doesn't cost a thing. Hospitality grows from within and pulls you into the world.

Imagine the surprising comfort of allowing your heart to see God in the face of another person.

At this communion table Jesus teaches hospitality. Each time we receive the bread and cup, we receive his gift of life as he invites us to find our home with God.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org