

Life's Surprises – Unexpected by Us but not by God

I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe. ~ PSALM 23:4 (CEV)

The past two years have been very different for all of us. Who would have ever thought we would live during a pandemic or that it would have lasted this long? Life is full of things we don't expect, and that was definitely true for our family last year.

Last April, Dean and I were in Florida having a wonderful vacation with friends in Clearwater Beach. In May we were in Kentucky on a mission trip. In June we were enjoying swimming in our pool with our grandkids. Life was good!

Then came July. Dean was diagnosed with cancer and our world, as we knew it, was turned upside down. It was a plethora of doctor appointments, scans, biopsies, lab work, and then 22 weeks of chemo treatments.

I had prayed for others going through this experience so many times, and now this was happening to us. But I was reminded repeatedly that God would never leave us and would be there to help us with whatever we faced if we just trusted Him. We grew in our faith walk tremendously. We learned to trust God like we never had before. We have a new understanding of what “peace that passes understanding” means. We have become bolder in our witnessing.

And God has used it for His good in amazing ways. Dean has touched, helped, and inspired more people than I can count. He had people praying for him who had never prayed before. And God is surely not done using this experience. As his hair is growing in, he is now speaking to groups in church and sharing the miraculous way God healed him. I am so thankful for the way the Lord used this experience in our lives and will be forever grateful knowing that no matter what unexpected surprises we may encounter, God is already there waiting to walk with us through them.

Dear Lord, thank you so much for never leaving us, especially when we go through life's trials. We praise your name that only you can bring amazingly good things out of bad and can teach us wonderful faith lessons through difficult circumstances. In your name we pray, amen.

DIANE SIZEMORE

BELIN MEMORIAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Don't Give the Enemy a Foothold

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ~ EPHESIANS 6:13-18 (NIV)

I have been reading a book that chronicles the experiences of a Nazi-occupied land during World War II. The enemy was very visible and interrupted people's lives by barging into their homes or businesses, making demands, and taking over. Many times the enemy took whatever they wanted: food, animals, or possessions. They set a curfew, which could be changed at a moment's notice, and then the soldiers would arrest the citizens for breaking curfew. Cruelty was the norm.

We, too, have enemies who are cruel and upset our lives. But they are not so visible. Satan and his demons are much more sly and sneaky. They know our weak points and take advantage of them without our even realizing it until too late.

Citizens living in an occupied land learn to obey the enemy's rules, and they avoid the enemy as much as they can. How can we avoid falling into our enemy's traps? Only by praying and reading God's Word and meditating on it daily. The enemy is very devious and takes advantage if we make even one little slip. We are to avoid all appearance of evil by putting on the full armor of God.

"The Message" translates the above portion of Ephesians this way:
Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long.

The wonderful thing we can count on is that the enemy is already a defeated foe, and we know that victory is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear LORD, thank you for the availability of your Word. Help us to remember to put on our armor daily.

MARY LOU STETSER
ZION UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Porcelain Sink

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

~ ISAIAH 53:5 (KJV)

“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your mind because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight without blemish and free from accusation.

~ COLOSSIANS 1:20-22 (NIV)

I stood there looking at a broken chip in my white porcelain sink. It’s been there for years. In an instant, the damage had been done, and that sink has been damaged for years. We just didn’t do anything about it.

Just like that chipped porcelain, anger, harmful words, or actions hurt, leaving brokenness and scars — some to fester and some to heal. The choice is ours. We actually bought a porcelain repair kit years ago, too. Like anger, we could choose to attempt to repair the brokenness or let it fester over time, leaving an ugly wound.

After years of ignoring that chip, we finally pulled the repair kit out and patched it. Interestingly, we had to keep it dry for three days.

Then we realized another problem. The patch was whiter than snow while the rest of the sink had yellowed and looked dingy. So we scrubbed and scrubbed until the sink was washed clean. But we know the scar is there if we look for it.

I saw a parallel to Jesus in that porcelain sink. I look for Him every day in my ordinary activities. Jesus was bruised and wounded for our transgressions. With His scars and blood we are washed clean. The choice is ours to receive what Jesus has done for us on the cross — to receive cleansing and to be seen without blemish.

Lord, help us to repent and then turn to God so that our sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from you. Thank you for healing our brokenness and for your unconditional love. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DIANA McMILLION

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Art Lessons

I like to build things. I like to paint things — gourds, Halloween decorations, kitchen cabinets, living room walls. Anything. I have at least five projects that I'm working on in my house at any given time, and I have a list of projects in the pipeline. Art is a big part of my life. Here are a few lessons that I have learned through the years.

Every year for work, I design a corn maze with a different theme. I have three or four stations in the maze decorated with scarecrows and signs related to the theme. I never have all of my ideas when I start working on the maze. Years ago, I didn't want to start working on the maze until I had all of my ideas solidified, but the deadline would approach and I still didn't have all of my ideas. I had to get started on something. Once I began working on the maze, the next idea would come to me. Now I know that I don't need to see everything to work on a project. I just need to start on the idea that I do have and God will give me the next idea at the right time.

For we live by faith, not by sight. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:7 NIV)

Sometimes I'm very excited about an idea, but when I begin working on it, I realize how long it's going to take and I get discouraged. In the past, I have abandoned many projects because they were more difficult than I had expected. (That's another reason why I have many ongoing projects around the house.) Now I'm trying to attack the project a little at a time so I don't feel overwhelmed. A little progress forward is still progress forward. Before I know it, the task will be complete.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (HEBREWS 10:36 NIV)

My mom hated art class. She said it gave her anxiety, and her mom always helped her so she could pass the class. Mom always says I got my artistic talent from my dad's side. I love working on a project. I get in a zone. It relaxes me. When I was younger, I didn't understand how my mom could not like art. How could it cause her anxiety when I found it so enjoyable? It took me a while to accept that my talent is unique. We are not all the same. God created me to think this way, and I should embrace my gifts.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. (1 CORINTHIANS 12:12 NIV)

Thank you Jesus for all of the lessons that you teach us. Please open our eyes this Lenten season so we can see them in our lives every day.

PATTI MOOD

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Keep Alert

They couldn't carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. ~ MARK 2:4 (CEB)

Contemporary Christian radio stations play a song sung by Jeremy Camp called “Keep Me in the Moment.” The lyrics include “Keep me in the moment 'cause I don't want to miss what you have for me.”

The paralyzed man in this verse from Mark 2 had four friends blessed with perseverance who were living in the moment. His friends had heard that Jesus was in Capernaum. They went to their friend and said, “Let's go!” The Bible tells us when they got to the house where Jesus was, they couldn't get in because of the crowd. Did they give up? No! They climbed up on the roof and lowered their friend down in front of Jesus!

This man suffered from two diseases: one was in his body, one was in his soul. It was a common belief in Bible times that when someone had physical problems, either his parents or the person himself had sinned, which caused the physical problem. Since this man was physically paralyzed, he could not go to the synagogue and be involved in religious activities. He also could not work to earn a living. He was both morally and physically disadvantaged.

As modern Christians, we have so much available to us to help people in these conditions. When we consider this paralyzed man, we tend to think that his biggest problem was physical. But the first thing that Jesus did was heal his sins and give him forgiveness. That was the most important action — getting right with God! Jesus assures us that when our sins are forgiven, there is no longer a barrier to our fellowship with God. Of course, Jesus also healed his body. Our paralyzed man no longer was paralyzed. He went home a happy man who was healed both physically and spiritually.

Dear God, during this time of reflection in Lent, help us to be alert for what you have for us in our daily walk with you.

TOM BENNETT

RICHWOOD UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

We Live in a Fractured World

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. ~ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18 (NASB)

On July 6 of this past year I was walking down the stairs with my dog to view the sunset on the lake. My leg suddenly exploded. I heard and felt it break: a spontaneous fracture of my left femur. Osteoporosis medications caused this to happen. Needless to say, I was in extreme pain and required treatment at the trauma center. After surgery and acute rehab, I spent months recovering at home with physical therapy several times a week. I also developed PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder).

We live in a fractured world, just like my leg. Things are not as they should be.

Anxiety and worry filled my life. To combat my state of affairs, I needed to have communication with God. I needed to express thanksgiving for all my blessings, including family and friends who took care of me, all the delicious meals, and many cards of concern and best wishes that were sent. I needed to fill my mind with light and peace, leaving no room for fear of another fracture.

I needed to be lifted up to see my problems from another perspective. This is an ongoing process for me — refusing to worry and trying to enjoy each day as a gift, which it is for everyone. We don't understand why difficulties happen to us, but putting trust in Jesus and depending on His peace help us to grow and better understand our circumstances.

Jesus was sent to us to bear our burdens and show us the Way. He took on our pain and fear and taught us how to live. Focus on His example.

Lord, thank you for healing fractures in our bodies, our lives, and our world. Help us to trust you more.

CONNIE LATHAM
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Let us...

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,
for he who promised is faithful.

~ Hebrews 10:23

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Those who have experienced fear know what a paralyzing effect it can have on a person's life. The stronghold of fear had a grip on me several years ago while experiencing a health crisis. Though my Christian faith was strong and I knew God was in control, there were times when I was overwhelmed with fear about my upcoming surgery. I could not understand how such a dreadful emotion could incapacitate me, so I prayed and asked God to remove it. As the date for my surgery drew near, so did the intensity of fear. I pleaded with God to give me something that I could hold on to — something to keep me from feeling like I was drowning in doom and gloom.

One evening, while washing the dinner dishes, I suddenly felt drenched with fear. I prayed, "God, I know you are here; please help me not to be consumed by this awful feeling." God's response was a voice in my head repeating the words, "Perfect love casts out fear." I knew these words were from Scripture, but I could not recall where. However, I just kept saying those five words over and over, and I felt God's peace upon me. In the days that followed, I quoted that portion of Scripture many times, and each time my fear disappeared. I wanted to know more about the context of these words, so I sat with my Bible and read I John 4:17-18:

By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the Day of Judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love because He first loved us. (NASB)

Every time I prayed, I thanked God for His comforting words, yet I felt there was something more He wanted me to learn. Every time I said those words, I asked God to reveal why they were so special to me. One day He did. When I concentrated on the words "perfect love," it was then I felt God telling me it was "perfect love" with a capital "P" and "L." When I wrote it down, I immediately saw that Perfect Love meant Jesus — God loves me so much, He gave me His Perfect Love to take away my fear.

On the day of my surgery, I knew that God's Perfect Love was with me every step of the way. While waiting to enter the operating room, a nurse aide informed me that there was a delay and I should not be anxious. I told her that I wasn't afraid. She asked me where my source of peace came from, and I smiled and said, "Perfect Love casts out fear." She smiled back and said, "Amen! You are in God's hands. You'll be just fine."

MARIE COOKSON

BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH