

I just celebrated my 15th year of ordained ministry. And that got me thinking back to what my life and ministry were like in those first years. In 2006, about a year after my ordination, I went down to New Orleans with a bunch of teens from Trinity Southport, and St. John's Bridgeport. We went down to help with some rebuilding in the city following the devastating Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest hurricanes in US history. I think there were about 20 of us altogether. We flew down, rented two vans, and set up residence at an Episcopal Church in the city where we slept in several rooms of the large parish hall.

What challenging work it was; homes were completely destroyed in many places, and in so many neighborhoods house after house was in a state of partial repair; the soggy wallboard had been taken down right after the hurricane in 2005, but in many houses, there weren't enough workers, or enough materials or enough energy to redo all the walls of all the homes. And so, many months later people were discouraged, and were without the resources to finish their homes.

Well, into this difficult environment we arrived; 16 teens and their four chaperones. After spending a day touring the damaged city, we got to work. We worked on one particular home in New Orleans and completely refurbished the interior walls of the home. It was quite an undertaking and the homeowner was grateful and surprised that we accomplished the task in a few days' time.

We surprised ourselves! Who knew that we could learn to put up drywall? At night we ate dinner at various soup kitchens around the city. We were all tired, but some of the kids did not want to eat in a soup kitchen. "I don't like that kind of food," one young person told me. "Well, this is what we have to eat," I replied. On that first evening he sat by himself and just picked at the food.

Fortunately, though, most everyone was so hungry and tired every night that there wasn't much complaining. By the end of the week I saw that same boy who had not wanted to eat, engaged in a conversation with a resident of the city and laughing out loud, eating and sharing a story. What a transformation! What a happy surprise that new friendships were formed between the teens, and they had gained a new respect for themselves, as well as the residents of New Orleans. The interior of that home was far from perfect, but the homeowner was so happy that it was completed, and so thankful for us that he made us lunch on the last day. And there were smiles and hugs all around. Surprising events, surprising outcomes from something that seemed so dismal, and so devastating. We can identify with that in our world today.

Now that we are in the Ordinary time of the Christian calendar, and the color of the hangings is "ordinary" green, I get to wear the very extra-ordinary green stole that Susanna Schindler made last year to recognize the beauty of the natural world, the flora and fauna, and all the beauty of our little corner of the earth. Even Keen is embroidered onto this stole.

And so, because it is Ordinary time, for many weeks to come we will be reading Hebrew Scripture in a semi-continuous fashion beginning today with this story about Abraham and Sarah who were unable to have children together. The couple was surprised by three strangers who came to rest under their tree. Abraham and Sarah fed them and it became clear that they were messengers from God when they delivered the surprising message that Sarah would have a child. Sarah was so surprised that she laughed. But as though it was improper for her to be happy at the thought of a dream coming true, she denied that she had laughed. The surprise message seemed too improbable.

In our Gospel reading today another surprise: Jesus, who the disciples followed as he went about healing and preaching turned to his followers and said to them, "OK. Now it's your turn." We aren't told how the disciples reacted to this news. There's no expression in the scripture of, "Who me?" But I would imagine that there were some who were eager to strike out following the instructions of Jesus, and there must have been a few who were reluctant, or concerned, or weren't happy about the idea of eating food from soup kitchens...or the 1st century equivalent of soup kitchens. Jesus was very clear, though, on what the mission was: proclaim the good news, heal people who are sick, and only go to towns that are right around here. Let's start with baby steps and keep it simple.

So, what do these surprising texts say to us today? Have we been surprised by God's actions and presence at this time? We are going through much tragedy and difficulty in our country. And doubtless there will be more we will face in the near future. But surprises are happening all around us in spite of this; Nascar making the announcement that they will no longer allow confederate flags to be flown at their races, Roger Goodell, the NFL Commissioner, announcing that he supports the players' rights to protest peacefully, and seeing so many white faces in the marches and protests that have taken place over the last few weeks since the death of George Floyd. Perhaps our country is now finally ready to address our original sin of slavery and its long and difficult aftermath.

Yes, and also there are still many people dying from Covid -19 in parts of our country. Yes, we still have much work to do to dismantle the systemic racism which infects our country. And yes, there are times when we can still laugh as well as cry. God has so many surprises in store for us. We are asked to have a little faith. Read a little, pray a little, help others a lot. There's no surprise in what God asks us to do. The surprise may be where God is asking us to go; a protest, a disaster relief event, a food pantry...where will we follow God next?