

“Handling the Unexpected”

Years ago, during my vicarage year, long before cell-phones, I was driving through the country side on highway from St. Louis back home. My vicarage congregation in Salem, Illinois was only a couple of hours away so occasionally I would end up back in the city for a night out. South central Illinois is mostly farm country and mostly flat. At about 1:00AM I encountered the unexpected. My headlights barely picked it up at first and then it became clear. A year-old steer had wandered into the middle of the road and was just standing there staring into my headlights. I'm glad I saw it. So, I pulled off trying to keep my headlights on the calf in case anyone else came along. Hopefully at least they would see my headlights and slow down.

So, I got out thinking I could just shew this dumb animal off the road. Nope. It just maneuvered enough to stay away from me and did not leave the road. Believe it or not that night others were also driving down that road. When I saw their headlights, I would try to wave them down and pray they saw the calf in the road before they clobbered it—and me. Realizing I wasn't getting anywhere with Mr. Hamburger I ran over to the nearest farm house, which happened to be right nearby. I figured it had to be theirs anyway so I'm going to go wake them up before someone gets hurt.

I got the door and knocked hard. I was greeted by a sleepy-eye fella in shorts, his wife behind him asking who it was. “I apologize for waking you up this late, but I think one of your calves has gotten out and is in the middle of the road.” To which he responded, “Must be that same calf again.” Apparently, this thing just didn't want to be separate from its momma and kept escaping from the pens on the other side of the road to get back to momma. So, we had a good old fashion round up in the middle of the highway all while dodging the occasional oncoming vehicle.

The farmer knew what to do and it a short while we had the calf off the road. After we got it rounded up there was a short goodbye and I was off on down the road again. I can honestly say to you that was totally unexpected and has turned into a fond memory for me from that time in my life. It just fit into the context of that year and the blessings of that year.

For Jesus ministry was a series of unexpected things. Consider Mark 6:45-56 for today. ⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

⁴⁷ Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.” ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. ⁵⁵ They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

All night up and until an hour before the sun was coming up the disciples are rowing hard against the winds and waves struggling to make progress. They are worn out and perhaps a little bitter at Jesus. Remember they wanted to send the people away. Jesus instead has them feeding the 5000 well into the evening. Originally, they were going in the boat, during the last boat trip, to a solitary place to get some rest by themselves. Instead, they were interrupted by the people who ran ahead of them. Jesus felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The feeding of the 5000 was a series of many unexpected things and interruptions. So, verse 52 tells us “for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” This verse gives me the impression that they were a little fed up with all the craziness.

In chapter 4 and 5 of Mark's account of the Gospel paints a picture of interruptions and unexpected things. So, why not one more?

Jesus doesn't have a boat to use so he just takes a stroll walking on the water. Like the calf in the middle of the road seeing a person walking on the water was completely out of place and quickly grabs their attention. Mark tells us that Jesus was about to pass by them—I guess to meet them on the other side. But their tired minds and their tired eyes, and their tired bodies had made them vulnerable to seeing Jesus but thinking He was a ghost. Jesus calls out to them and announces his presence. Mark cuts out Peter's attempt to walk on the water. But Jesus announces Himself, "Don't be afraid." When He climbs into the boat the winds die down and the waters calm just did in Mark 4:35-39.

We learn a few things about such unexpected things. First, expect your plans to be interrupted. It may be brief like herding a calf off the road or your plans may be completely changed, like not rowing to a quiet place for rest. One thing is for sure the Lord will gladly throw in the unexpected things. In the case of the disciples, it was to shake up the hardness of their hearts over the feeding of the 5000 and get their attention on bigger things than a little rest. For the calf experience, I would like to think that was a night that was good for me as well as the farmer.

Secondly, expect Jesus to get in the way of a dull heart or sinful attitude. The disciples were grumpy and tired, fearful and worn. They had seen a lot of action and hadn't even had the chance to catch up to all that Jesus was trying to teach them. When it says that the disciples' hearts were hardened Jesus walking on the water definitely would get them to rethink the loaves and what that means. The fact that they were amazed seems to indicate that they had missed something with all the miracles they had been witnessing. And Jesus walking on the water would definitely steer their minds away from their own discomforts and fears. Jesus was waking them up to something greater, namely who Jesus is and what He was there to do.

Finally, the unexpected often gets our attention better than our best laid plans. Finding a calf in the middle of the road sticks in my memory. Obviously, Mark's account also means that it stuck in the memory of the disciples. I think this is where God's grace does its best work--in the unexpected things. The disciples never expected Jesus to catch up to them walking on the water. And even though the disciples were told several times about the cross and resurrection they didn't expect a resurrected Jesus to show up on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. In the same way unexpected things have a way of grabbing our attention much more efficiently than the things we plan in our head. And if the Lord can accomplish a greater faith in the surprises that come then He will certainly endorse them.

Unexpected things happen all the time. Our roll-over accident in Tennessee woke up an appreciation for our family and how quickly things can change, especially our plans to go to Florida. Meeting Tricia on my vicarage came at a time in my life when I was thinking about traveling to Germany as a single man with some of my classmates. Those plans definitely changed. And even losing my Grampa Woods, which for me was a huge shock and loss. It was my first experience losing someone close to me but something about it changes things for us. The experience ended up ultimately leading my path here to Grace as a Pastor. The unexpected isn't always painless or trivial. Sometimes it can be very painful and traumatic. Within those moments I have come to believe that God's grace is up to something. Besides what kind of life would it be if life had no curve balls to throw at us. The unexpected has a way of providing depth to faith and to living our lives and God willing, encountering Jesus more often in unexpected ways.

And now the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with His favor and give you His peace in Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30