**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“The Peculiar Ways of God”**

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“*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless, that I may make My covenant between Me and you, and may multiply you greatly”* (Gen. 17:1-2).

The first thing that strikes us about this passage is that Abram was ninety-nine years old . . . ninety-nine when the LORD called him to be the father of a great nation. Sarah was about ten years younger. Can you see this old couple? Their knuckles and knees ache with arthritis. Their shoulders have thinned, hair too. Their faces are latticed with the lines of their years. Their smiles show some gaps. Yet, Yahweh has big plans for this unlikely couple.

In the next chapter, the Lord promises Sarah will give birth to a son. When Sarah overhears this news, she laughs. She can’t help herself. She’s been barren all her life, and now this . . . giving birth in the geriatric ward? She laughs at the absurdity of it all. She laughs because she and Abraham haven’t been intimate for years. She laughs because the Lord seems to believe it will happen and expects them to believe it too. Has God lost His mind? Of all people, why them? With millions to choose from, why choose such an unlikely couple? Highly irregular, don’t you think? A strange choice. Unconventional. Ill-advised.

But when you think of it, this is all very consistent with God’s usual way of doing business. If you were to give God five options, four of them good and practical, and one of them peculiar, imprudent, unpractical, foolish even . . . you just know He’s going to be drawn to that one. He’ll choose the one no consultant would ever recommend. But it’s all to prove a point: the miracle is God’s doing, not man’s. Hebrews 11 says, “Therefore from one man and him as good as dead, were born descendants . . . as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore” (v.12). Paul says, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

God is always choosing the strange and peculiar and unconventional to show the surpassing power and grace is His, and His alone. So, for example, God did not choose Esau who was honest and reliable, (granted a little dim and impulsive, but a hard worker). Instead, God chose Jacob, a con artist, a fraud whom you could not trust.

Who could have predicted that God would choose a man like Noah, who apparently liked to tip the bottle a bit much every now and then, or Moses, who was trying to lay low for braining a guy in Egypt? Or the prophets, who were a raggedy lot, some a little unhinged, it seems, and many of them wanting nothing to do with proclaiming His Word? Jonah, for example, when told to preach in Ninevah took off in the other direction, because he’d just as soon see the Ninevites perish rather than repent. With so many to choose from, why would God choose someone so truculent and hateful? Unless, unless it’s to show the miracle is in God’s Word and not in the one proclaiming it, his creativity or enthusiasm or even his sincerity.

God’s ways are peculiar ways. One of the ancestors of Jesus turns out to be Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute. She’s right there in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus for all to see. How her DNA got into the royal line is anybody’s guess, but neither Matthew nor any of the early church copyists ever thought to sanitize Scripture of that little embarrassment because first, it was God’s Word, not some play or poem. And second, they knew God had His reasons, and that was good enough. They knew God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways His ways (Is. 55:8), especially when it comes to grace.

God’s ways are peculiar. Still don’t buy it? Think about circumcision to mark the Jews as His people. Of all the people He could have chosen to be His own, why on earth did He choose the Jews, who as somebody said, were just like everybody else only more so? I think that means more faithful and more idolatrous, more courageous and more cowardly, more forgiven and more punished. Yet to them, God says, “I will be your God and you shall be My people” (Ex. 6:7). No sooner is the promise made than the people are dancing around a golden calf. And yet, see how God loved them, and stayed with them because He said He would.

It’s a comedy of grace coursing through the Old Testament. So, when the big day comes for God’s Son to be born, you just know it’s not going to happen in any conventional way, because that’s not God’s way of doing grace. So, Mary gives birth in a place that smells of cattle and dung and hay; a dusty place with scattered mice droppings and maybe a wheezing cat, and spider webs in every corner. It’s outrageous, even by first century standards, and especially for *this* newborn. But it’s so very consistent with long established patterns in Scripture. Whenever God’s doing something gracious, it is rarely in conventional, predictable ways.

When Jesus began His public ministry, He surrounded Himself with twelve disciples, highly irregular choices – not recruited from the great rabbinical schools, not even guys inclined toward theology. No, these were fishermen and tax collectors He bumped into along the way. But they’ll do. In fact, He would say to them, “He who listens to you listens to Me; he who rejects you rejects Me, but he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” (Lk. 10:16). That’s putting a lot of confidence in these guys, don’t you think? “Not advisable” the consultants would say. Sure enough, they failed Him in spectacular ways. Still, He was not ashamed to be called their friend, and no one can contest that they turned the world upside down. Yet, it wasn’t their doing. It was His, all along. Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.

When Jesus started telling them about His death, He made it clear it wouldn’t be of the usual sort, where loved ones fluff your pillows and hold your hand and moisten your lips with a little sponge on a stick. No, that would be way too comfortable and conventional. For Him, it would have to be different, especially if His death is to do something about our problem of sin, death, and the devil. It would have to be something like crucifixion, the most peculiar choice of them all. When Jesus spoke of it, Peter thought Jesus had lost His mind. But you can’t just wink at sin and still be just. He must pay the price for our sin, or we are lost.

Therefore, God’s Son, holy, gentle, and good, is stripped down and then flogged to within an inch or two of His life, and finally, crucified. Who could have predicted it? (Isaiah certainly did, as other prophets too, but nobody much listens to them anymore). And so, no one was quite prepared for a Savior like Jesus. He was . . . is . . . unlike anyone we have ever encountered on this earth. Everything He did was different. Of course, it was! He is, after all, not just one of us. He is the Son of God.

* So, we were prepared for a king who would take hold of power and authority and *rule*, without ever letting go of the power. That’s what men in authority like to do. We were not prepared for a God who would empty Himself, humble Himself, and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
* We were prepared for a god who would take delight in meeting out justice on the wicked, not for a God who rejoices over one sinner who repents.
* We were prepared for a god who strikes hard bargains, not for a God who gives as much for an hour’s work as for a day’s.
* We were prepared for a god who would frown on all the pleasures of this earthly life, not for a God who would turn 150 gallons of water into a very fine wine.
* We were prepared for a king who would invite to the wedding feast of His Son only a short and highly exclusive list of guests. We were not prepared for a King who sent His servants to the streets to invite anyone they find, both the good and the bad.
* We were prepared for a god to whom we need to make commitments and promise to straighten up and fly right, not for a God who comes down and splashes us with water and makes commitments and promises to us.
* We were prepared for a god who demands we remember what he did for us and gives the symbols of bread and wine to jog our memories. We were not prepared for a God who feeds us with His very flesh and blood, in, with, and under the bread and wine for our forgiveness. How can it be? I do not know. But He seems to believe it and wants us to believe it to. And wants us to receive it too, often, because it’s good for us.
* We were prepared for a god who demands good works, lots of them, to be right with him, just like all the other gods of the world. We were not prepared for Jesus, who scandalizes the world with His grace.

Abram was ninety-nine years old when the LORD promised to make him the father of a great nation. Sounds like 1 Corinthians, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God . . . Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” That was from Paul, also an odd pick, given his penchant for persecuting Christians.

God’s ways are peculiar ways. Therefore, in our own lives, we can expect Got to lead *us* to do peculiar things too. To take the initiative to serve others rather than waiting for others to serve us; to give our money away rather than hoarding it; to love our enemies rather than loathe them. We can expect God to lead us to places we’d rather not go and do things we’d rather not do . . . like take meals on wheels into a home that might be dark and stinky and stuffed with junk. Or going to the ER with an elderly person from church who has no one else. Or lovingly serve a parent with advanced dementia who is cranky and ungrateful. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old and did not yet have a rightful heir, the LORD promised to make him the father of a great nation. That sounds like God’s MO. That sounds like God as He was, is, and ever shall be.

Maybe then our lives should also reflect the peculiar, strange, and gracious ways of God. Amen.