

“Surprise!”

Isaiah 43:18-21; Luke 2:41-52 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to seek you
and see you in all places, common and unexpected. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.*

How much do you think about exclamation points? I was thinking of offering a prize to the first person to figure out how many exclamation points are involved in our service today, but I couldn't decide if that means just in the bulletin, or also in the lyrics of the hymns. However many it is, I think it's probably a record.

There is a meme that occasionally makes the rounds on social media remarking on how some of us use exclamation points in texts and emails. It's mostly commentary on the tendency to use too many, noting how often the writer has to go back and turn at least a few of those exclamation points into periods, to avoid sounding crazy. What is it that makes us punctuate our sentences this way? I think it's often a desire to add feeling or gratitude to what we're writing. Just a period can seem like speaking without any expression in your voice, so exclamation points can help us feel like we're communicating our humanity. But once you realize every sentence in your text or email ends that way, it just sounds like you're shouting. Especially if you use more than one in any given spot. That's why so many of us often go back and take some out. We want to seem positive and approachable, but not manic. Somehow the right number of exclamation points helps us feel like we're putting our friendliest foot forward.

I wonder, though, is this how it feels when exclamation points arrive in our lives, as opposed to in the writing we deal with in a given day? The exclamation points in our lives may indicate Big Feelings, but those feelings are not necessarily always positive. An exclamation point is often there to stop us in our tracks. It is a sign of something surprising, a dramatic shift from what we expected. I don't know if I do this with any other scripture in the Bible, but when I think of Isaiah 43, verse 19 in my head, there is always an extra word. In my head, it starts with the word "Look!" definitely including an exclamation point at the end. It might even be one of those more "biblical" words for "look," like "Behold!" or "Lo!" It's just very clear from the rest of the verse that God really wants to have our attention right there: "Behold! I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" I guess I'm hearing an unspoken exclamation point, simply because of the drama of the moment. And that's just it, isn't it? It's not positivity or gratitude; it's drama. I am doing a new thing, God is saying. Forget about all that stuff that happened before. We're going this way now.

But that's easier said than done, isn't it? Were you ready for something new? Are you okay with letting go of the past? What happens when God says, "Let's go!" and we don't feel like going yet? Sometimes the exclamation points that arrive in our lives herald challenges and difficulty; they often mean that something is about to change. And change is hard, even if it leads somewhere good.

Sometimes exclamation points just mean life has gotten louder. It seems to me like there were probably a lot of exclamation points in the conversations that were

happening in this story from Jesus' childhood that we just read from Luke, for instance. Is it hard to imagine the Mother Mary raising her voice? Or is it harder to read this story and imagine any parent not raising their voice? Honestly, this story is sort of shocking, on a few different levels. First of all, we're usually encouraged to assume that Mary and Joseph were model parents. They were raising the Son of God, after all. So how is it that they managed to get a whole day away from Jerusalem without noticing their child was missing? You can only imagine the bickering between the two of them as they made their way back to town. "You were supposed to have him!" "Well, I was busy with the whatever-it-was, so you should have checked!"

And whether voices were raised during those conversations at the temple or they were held in that sort of vehement whisper that also requires exclamation points, there was definitely some drama once they found him. "What were you thinking, child?! Do you have any idea how worried we were?!" And then comes that terrible, holy sass. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Can you imagine the look on Mary's face? Sometime the exclamation point is in a facial expression and doesn't even need words.

Twelve is a hard age. No longer a child, exactly, chomping at the bit to do grown-up things, but still not truly capable or willing to think through the consequences of our choices. Since this is the only story we have from Jesus' childhood in canonical scripture, we don't know if this sort of thing had happened before. Seems pretty clear that, however the exclamation points were arranged, adolescent Jesus learned his lesson

though, given that verse about how he went back to Nazareth with them and “was obedient.” And then there is that concluding verse saying “His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” That sounds very holy, but do you think maybe it’s a euphemism for the silent treatment? There’s more than one way to insert an exclamation point into the conversation!

It's important for us to consider whether this story tells us more about twelve-year-olds or something about the nature of God. This is not the last time Jesus wasn't where people thought he should be. It's not the last time he showed up somewhere unexpected. And if the verses we heard from Isaiah tell us anything, none of that should have been all that surprising. Look! Behold! I am doing something new! God tells us this almost as often as God tells us not to be afraid. (Do you suppose there's a connection there?) The truth is that we struggle with new things. We struggle with surprises. We don't like adjusting to shifting realities. It would be really comforting to just know that we could trust that God will be right here in this specific spot whenever we need some divine assistance.

But a god that doesn't surprise us would be no kind of god at all, and certainly not the God of Jesus Christ. A god that doesn't teach us how to navigate change would be pretty useless, given that our world is in constant flux. A god that never does new things couldn't possibly be called a Living God. Challenging as following Jesus might be, with the zigs and zags that path entails, I have no interest in worshipping a god that is a mere statue, whose only virtue is consistency.

It is the God of Jesus Christ who is able to lead us into an uncertain future. It is the God who says “Behold! I am doing a new thing!” quickly followed by “Be not afraid!” that is worthy of trusting as we move forward into a new year and a new season. If our God demands that we occasionally look a little harder, turn our eyes toward unexpected places to find the Divine, it’s because that searching is the work of ministry in Jesus’ name. When God tells us to stop considering “the things of old,” it’s because we need to find new building materials to work with, rather than continuing to try to build castles from crumbs. If we find all this exasperating, we will do well to remember the Holy Mother and ponder these things in our hearts until we’ve gotten our attitude adjusted. Our faith is in a God of exclamation points, not boring old periods.

Hallelujah and Amen!