

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“*Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!*”**

**1 Corinthians 10:1 – 13  
Isaiah 55:1 – 9**

**February 28, 2016**

You know, I’ll bet that just about every one of us, at one time or another, has uttered the phrase, “*The Lord works in mysterious ways.*” And if we haven’t said those exact words, I’ll bet we’ve said something very much like them. “*The Lord works... in mysterious ways.*” Something of significance happens in our life, at a time or in a way that we never expected... and our default reaction is to think that God has been up to something very mysterious indeed, to behave so unexpectedly!

For example, when I received the call to come here and be your pastor, Sylvia and I were both telling all our friends that, “*Yep, God sure does work in mysterious ways!*” Because neither one of us ever, in our wildest imagination, thought that we’d *ever* be living on Lon Gisland!

We knew nothing about Long Island. And the extent of my knowledge was Southampton was the old Phyllis Diller sitcom, “*The Pruitts of Southampton.*” In fact, when Beth Gardner first emailed me with an invitation to do a conference call interview with the pastor search committee, I thought that Southampton was upstate somewhere! And when I checked a map and saw where Southampton actually *is*... it looked like the last outpost of civilization. It seemed highly unlikely that we’d ever wind up in Southampton, on Long Island. There were a half dozen other churches that we expected we’d land at before we’d ever land here. So the process which brought us here was cloaked in mystery so deep, that not even Lieutenant Columbo could figure it out!

And, as I’ve told you before, my call to ministry was about as mysterious a way of God working as you could ever imagine. By the time I finally made it to college, my vocational expectations had covered the waterfront from musician, to veterinarian, to automotive machinist, to telephone operator, to English teacher, to counselor, to stand-up comedian. And nowhere on that list would you find the word “pastor.” In fact, even after I’d decided to **go** to seminary and become a pastor, the battery of vocational preference tests that I had to take when I came under care of my presbytery in California revealed that I should be a **photographer**, not a pastor! A photographer? I didn’t even own a camera! So, how did I wind up in ministry? Big mystery, right? God working mysteriously, yes?

And each of you could add similar examples of God working in your life in ways which felt like two-plus-two coming up five... in ways in which all expectations were pointing this way, while God was moving you that way. So, I guess that’s the deal, right? God is mysterious... His way of doing things is mysterious... and all we can do is hold on to our hats, and go with the mysterious flow.

Well, yes... and no! Look, there’s no getting around the fact that God’s way of doing things isn’t always going to make sense to us. And that’s because, as God has said through the prophet Isaiah: “*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*”

The truth of the matter is that we only know and understand a tiny, microscopic part of the mind of God. Which isn't to say that we don't know *anything* about God... of course we do. But what we *don't* know is vastly larger than what we *do* know. So, while we do our best to keep up with God's activity in our life; and while we should always be trying to learn as much as we can about what God has revealed about Himself in the Scriptures; we need to make peace with the fact that there's only so far we can go, and there's only so much we can know.

We cannot, and we will not be able, to fully grasp and understand the mind and the ways of Almighty God. We are finite... God is infinite; we are mortal... God is eternal; God is God... and we are not! God is always looking at things, including our life and our world, from the point of view of eternity... which is a perspective to which we are not now privy. So, we're never going to be able to completely do away with mystery in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. And to be able to accept that mystery, and come to terms with it... is a sign of a mature and growing faith.

*But...* that doesn't mean that all we can do is just wander around in a fog, vainly trying to get our hearts and minds around whatever it is that God is mysteriously up to in our lives! Hey, our Lord may be mysterious, but that doesn't mean that we don't know, and can't know, *anything!* In fact, we can know a lot, and we can understand a lot... but to do so, we need to adjust our thinking a little bit, and realize that, in addition to working in *mysterious* ways, Almighty God also works in *unexpected* ways; which may not be so mysterious at all, if we just change our perspective about the way that God goes about His business.

Think, for a moment, of that old TV sit-com, "Gomer Pyle USMC..." one of the great comedy shows of all time, in my opinion, right up there with "Get Smart," and "The Honeymooners," and "I Love Lucy." Anyway, if you recall, gruff, by-the-book Sergeant Carter was always yelling at Private Pyle for one dumb screw-up or another; you know, it was always, "Pyle! What are you doing?" or "I can't hear you!" and so on.

But, every once in a while, just as Sergeant Carter was getting ready to lower the boom on Pyle for some knucklehead mistake, Pyle would break into this huge, goofy, grin and say, "*Surprise, surprise, surprise!*" And then Sergeant Carter would learn that he'd completely misjudged the situation, and that, instead of doing something bad... Private Pyle was actually doing something good.

In those cases, the "catch" on which the comedy turned wasn't a mistake in *behavior* by Pyle... it was a mistake in *perception* by Carter. You see, the sergeant expected that this hayseed Marine could only do dumb stuff; that Gomer Pyle wasn't capable of doing something smart. But Gomer Pyle *was* capable of doing something smart on occasion; and if the hard-headed sergeant had simply broadened his understanding of what the private was able to do... the "smart move" wouldn't have seemed so unexpected, and Gomer Pyle wouldn't have been able to say "*Surprise, surprise, surprise!*"

Of course, then you wouldn't have had a comedy, and the show would've been canceled, and Jim Nabors would have spent the rest of his career singing "The Impossible Dream" on the Andy Williams Show. But, the point is, that Sergeant Carter's understanding was limited by his preconceived expectations about Private Pyle. And what I want us to understand is that, sometimes, we have the same problem with our expectations about Almighty God.

We've already seen that God is at times going to be mysterious. That's the nature of the way things are, and there's nothing we can do about it. But, we often make God seem more mysterious than He really is... simply because, like Sergeant Carter, we come to the Lord with a whole set of preconceived expectations as to what God should do, and how God should act, and when God should get things done.

And, if we're really honest, I think that, most of the time, the preconceived expectation that we place upon our Heavenly Father is that He should be... *just like me!* Just like us! That God should see things like we see them; and arrange things like we would arrange them; and follow the course of action that we would follow if it was all up to us. And then, when, for one reason or another, God fails to fulfill that expectation... it's a vast and impassable *mystery*. "*God didn't do what I would do. Wow... He does work in mysterious ways!*"

Actually, the bigger mystery is why we would ever think that the Creator of the universe and our sovereign Lord should be bound to do *anything* in the way that we would do it! Partly that's just human nature; all we really *know* is the way that we would do something, if it were up to us. So it's natural that we would expect for God to act in pretty much the same way.

But we have a lot more than "human nature" going for us here; we also have the witness of Scripture, and the collective experience of God's people for about the past five thousand years. And what that Scripture and that experience tell us, loudly and clearly, is that Almighty God is going to do things in the way that *He* thinks is best! Which may or may not be the same way that *we* think is best. And what we need to do, as Christian disciples, is spend less time wringing our hands and fretting about God being so mysterious; and spend more time getting our faith around the fact that we serve a Lord who very often does the exact opposite of what we would expect. And that's not always so "mysterious," it's just unexpected. It's surprising.

God works in unexpected ways. God works in surprising ways. And as we grow in our understanding of God; and as our faith becomes less constricted by our own wants, and desires, and expectations; God's ways will become a lot less mysterious, and they'll begin to make a lot more sense. And we will become more comfortable with the idea that my limited, fallen, finite perspective isn't the "standard" to which God Almighty needs to conform Himself. While at the same time becoming a little more motivated to bring our limited, fallen, finite perspective into line with the way in which God actually works.

Now, this is an issue of growing faith; of maturing faith; of taking some steps to get ourselves out of the center of the universe... and following the leadership of the One who made us, and who's called us to follow Him with courage and assurance. Hear again the words of Isaiah, who reminds us that our calling, our game plan, our challenge as Christian disciples... is to seek the Lord, to turn to Him, to trust Him, and follow Him faithfully, even on those days when we're not altogether sure where it is He's leading:

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

That's not a message of mystery, and confusion, and disorientation. That's a message of hope, and encouragement, and fidelity. And it's an invitation to seek, and to follow, and to trust

our Heavenly Father... every day of our life. And that's what being a Christian disciple is really all about!

So, the next time you're having a rough day, and God is feeling little more mysterious than you're comfortable with; imagine Gomer Pyle, grinning and saying, "Surprise, surprise, surprise!" God still has you in His loving arms. God's still with you, as you bear the burdens of the day. And God will still get you, right where you need to be. That's His promise; and that's our conviction and hope! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!