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The Surprising News and Its Saving Practicality

Mark Love

Let me begin with the premise that the gospel is *news*. Shocking, I know. The news is news—a tautology. But here's the deal: we tend to make the gospel into something other than news, like a proposition or a theory of the atonement—important things, but things that aren't fundamentally news. I want to demonstrate, however, that it's important that the gospel remain in the form of news, both for the sake of right understanding and of good practice. The gospel *is* news, surprising news. It's always surprising news.

The Surprise of the Gospel: Three Texts

Isaiah 52–53, one of the few texts in the Greek Old Testament that uses the word *gospel*, joins the notion of gospel with surprise. We know the lines well, but are less clear on their setting. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings *good news*, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isa 52.7, italics added). The good news in this instance is that God's reign will be experienced as the return of exiles to Zion. In fact, the prophet depicts the return of the exiles in language reminiscent of the Exodus—Israel's most significant memory—that demonstrates both God's power and care for his distressed people. “The Lord has bared his mighty arm in the presence of all nations” (Isa 52.10). Isaiah 52.11–12 deepens the Exodus imagery with the language of departure, purification, haste, and flight,¹ all with the promise that the “Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.”

The announcement of God's work on behalf of the exiles is public, done in the sight of the nations. So surprising, however, is this work of God on behalf of his servant² of verse 13 that “he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall contemplate” (Isa 52.15).

And the nations are surprised. This is news to them. “Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (53.1). They missed the powerful movement of God in a new Exodus on Israel's behalf. To be clear, there's debate over the identity of the watching audience of chapter 53. Some take the audience to be those who persecuted the prophet and treated him shabbily. This certainly might be the actual audience the prophet has in mind. I think, however, that the literary audience (the audience imagined in the scene) is the nations who oppressed Israel and can't believe that the events announced here could be considered the mighty work of God. This makes the best sense of the immediate context where the nations are startled and kings shut their mouths.

Regardless of the identity of the audience, the point is fundamentally the same. The announcement that this is mighty work of God—that Israel's God reigns—is shocking news. The facts on the ground don't seem

1. Although in this case, they will not be required to leave in haste or “go in flight.”

2. I take the identity of the servant here to be Israel, which seems to make the best sense of the overall context. Israel, through the abuse of exile, is the disfigured servant of YHWH.

to support the claim. But if the claim can be believed, if things they “had not been told . . . they shall see,” then there is a chance they can be startled into a new reality. And this is what happens in the rest of Isaiah 53. “Surely, he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions” (vv. 4–5a). The startling news that Zion’s God reigns through a wounded, disfigured servant creates the possibility that others will see their own complicity in the injustice done to God’s servant. It pierces their own self-perpetuating view of reality to expose the world according to God’s reality. This new perception would result not only in Israel’s salvation, but the salvation of the nations as well.

I think a similar dynamic is at work in Mark 1.14–15. “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the *gospel* of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the *gospel*’” (italics mine). The surprise here is not as obvious, but I think is implied. The proclamation of the gospel comes against the backdrop of John’s imprisonment and the placement of Jesus’s ministry in Galilee. Neither the imprisonment of John nor the location of Galilee suggest that God has come in power, or that the kingdom of God has come near. The summary of Jesus’s announcement of the kingdom of God ends with the exhortation to “repent and believe the gospel.” This unlikely set of circumstances is not obviously God’s coming in power. To see it as such will require repentance, a reorientation of perception that allows this to be received as good news. So surprising is the form of God’s kingdom coming near that even Jesus’s own followers don’t believe it, highlighted by Peter’s rebuke of Jesus in Mark 8.31–33. But Mark’s gospel is insistent: this story is the good news of God, with a suffering messiah at the middle of it.

In the same way, we could look at Paul’s understanding of the gospel in First and Second Corinthians. Paul has not come to the Corinthians with *sophia logou* (“wise words,” 1 Cor 1.17), but *logos staurou* (“word of the cross,” v.18). Paul’s gospel does not register on the commonplaces of accepted wisdom. The word of the cross for many seems weak and foolish, but for those who are being saved, it is the power of God (v. 18). Like the kings who are startled and close their mouths in Isaiah 52, Paul depicts the “rulers of this age” as unable to recognize that they “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2.8). So the startling revelation that God’s power is being worked through what others perceive as weakness requires belief, or a different perception of the world. “We no longer see things from a human point of view,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5.16. “Though we once regarded Christ that way, we do so no longer. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, everything has become new!” For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus is startling news that allows the possibility of perceptual change so that nothing can be viewed in the same way. Once you believe that the cross is the power of God, then the ways God is renewing all things become visible.

In each of these texts, the gospel is not a proposition or theory of atonement, but the announcement of an event. In each case, the event announced is a contravention of standard wisdom, particularly when viewed from the perspective of rulers and authorities. As such, the news announced is a surprise that, when believed, can change perceptions of the world in ways that are saving.

This is not the way we often think of the gospel. The gospel, in the view of many, is about the cross as a sacrifice for sins. The language of sin and sacrifice is certainly one way the Bible talks about the cross, but hardly the only way. There are other biblical perspectives on the cross that are no less about salvation, and that correspond to the notions of gospel I am developing here. As an example, I want to use Luke’s narrative approach to the meaning of Jesus’s death.

The Cross in Luke-Acts

In Luke, Jesus consistently aligns his pending death with the previous deaths of God’s prophets.³ At a strategic moment in Luke’s gospel, after having already predicted his death on two occasions, Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem,” the place where he will be killed (9.51). A few chapters later he offers a lament over Jerusalem:

3. I am relying here on several sources, notably Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) and S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (13.34). This lament over Jerusalem matches woes delivered to the Pharisees in 11.37–52. At the conclusion of a string of woes, Jesus implicates them in the killing of God's prophets from Abel to Zechariah.

Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. (11.47–52)

In setting his face to Jerusalem, Jesus is clearly aligning his death with the “blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world,” for which “this generation” will be held responsible.” The judgment against “this generation” finds an echo in Peter's sermon in Acts 2. After calling the crowd to repentance and baptism, “[Peter] testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!’” (Acts 2.40). Jesus's death and subsequent resurrection in Luke clearly has something to do with this identification with those righteous ones who have suffered unjustly throughout history. The salvation offered by Jesus in Luke is specifically offered in Acts 2 to those who find themselves on the complicity side of killing God's prophets, reaching a culmination in the unjust killing of Jesus. But how does Jesus's death in this circumstance offer salvation?

The people in Acts 2 did not participate in the killing of Jesus the way that Pilate or Herod or the High Priest did, or even in the way Judas did when he betrayed Jesus or Peter when he denied him. It's not personal guilt that Jesus is concerned about in Luke 11 or that Peter is in Acts 2. The problem is much bigger than personal guilt. The problem is the way the world works. The problem is that God keeps sending prophets and the world as it is arranged keeps killing them. This is what we need to be saved from.

In Luke, the crucifixion of Jesus is not about justice, but unmasks a deeper motivation to maintain social control and cohesion through violence. Though Pilate finds nothing in the prisoner to sentence him to death, the governor gives in to the crowd's desire to crucify Jesus, conceivably to avoid the social unrest that might come otherwise. Significantly, Luke reports that one result of the series of interrogations that Jesus faces is “that same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies” (23.12). Herod, Pilate, the chief priests, and the people all find a place of unity in the violent death of Jesus. The unjust killing of Jesus has kept, and even made, the peace desired by the rulers.

The thing about belonging to a way of being in the world that keeps the peace through violence, however, is that the victims need to stay dead. Jesus knew this. His woes against the Pharisees and lawyers seem to indicate this. He compares the Pharisees “to unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it” (11.44). Jesus seems to be saying that their surface observance of the law obscures the neglect of deeper matters related to justice. Their piety, in this case, covers murder. The image is more explicitly tied to the killing of prophets in Jesus's condemnation of the lawyers. The lawyers build tombs for the prophets whom their ancestors killed. They are honoring those who were unjustly killed, blunting the offense of the violence and burying it, literally. They are using the deaths of the prophets as propaganda for the very system that killed them.

The inconvenient matter in the killing of Jesus is that he didn't stay dead. The amazing scene of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is explained by Peter as the result of God having raised this Jesus from the dead. Not only that, but this one who was raised from the dead wasn't just any prophet, but Israel's messiah. And not only have they killed the one they long expected and hoped for, but this Jesus is the very Lord who now reigns over the kingdom of God and who will judge the living and dead. Peter ends the sermon with the worst words possible, “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2.36). Oops.

They were cut to the heart is the way Luke describes their reaction. To use the language of Isaiah 52, they are startled. They have found themselves serving the wrong kingdom. It's not what they thought they were doing. They are, after all, Luke tells us, "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2.5). Jesus knew this as well, praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23.34). But having found themselves now on the wrong side of the appearing of God's kingdom, they might likely have expected divine condemnation or retribution. "Brothers, what shall we do?" might better be understood as "Brothers, is there anything we can do?"

The expectation of the crowd might have been retributive violence.⁴ The good news is that vengeance will not be visited upon the crowd in Acts 2. Instead, Peter responds to their startled awareness with an even more surprising outcome: "Repent and be baptized, for the forgiveness of your sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38). Of all the remarkable things that happen at Pentecost, Peter's offer of the Holy Spirit for those who handed Jesus over to death might very well be the most remarkable. They have not forfeited their right to be a part of a different way of making peace. "For the promise is for you," Peter continues, "and for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2.38–39). This is a surprising bit of good news.

Peter extends God's peace to the crowd through the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the Holy Spirit. The repentance that Peter calls for in 2.38—that would save hearers from "this corrupt generation"—requires more than just deciding "Let's agree not to kill any more of God's prophets, but instead let's listen to them." We keep killing God's prophets, even to this day, because our lives are embedded in practices and systems that make us blind to the fact that these are God's prophets in the first place. Repentance would require participation in a way of life so at odds with the "real world" that our perceptions are dramatically altered. We would have to be delivered from a way of life impressed with the power of sanctioned violence, a commitment to the accumulation of wealth, practices of exclusion that create categories of clean and unclean, and worship that dulls the senses to the world in favor of the inspiring and uplifting. And we would need to be a part of a way of life that pulled in the opposite direction. I think Luke would say it has to be a life like this:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2.43–47)

Gospel Practice

The description of *gospel* provided above defines it less as an abstract transaction between God and sinner and more as a historical occurrence with social consequences and concrete embodiments. To put it simply, it can be practiced. Edward Farley and Michael Gorman, among others, have made this point in helpful, though different ways.⁵ I want to focus particularly on three ways that surprise as a category for ministry underscores the priority of news: location, proclamation, and interpretation (hermeneutics).

Social location. As we have seen in the texts explored above, participation in the gospel requires repentance that results in a new perceptual awareness. We see the world differently, more in keeping with how God would see the world. Perception, or the way we see things, is determined to a large extent by the location from which we view the world. In Isaiah 52–53, the viewpoint is not that of rulers and kings, but that of exiles. In Mark, the standpoint from which to view the story is Galilee, not Jerusalem or Rome. In 1 Corinthians, true perception

4. See the parable of the wicked tenants (Luke 20.9–16) . Also note the response of the crowd to Jesus's sermon in Luke 4 that leaves no room for retribution for the Gentiles, but instead seems to include them in the liberating "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4.16–30).

5. Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Erdmanns, 2015).

comes from the scandalous location of the cross, not from the perspective of rulers who crucified the Lord of glory. In Luke, to see the world rightly means taking the side of the innocent victims of sanctioned violence. In each case, the perspective of rulers, or principalities and powers, is to be resisted in favor of the perspective of the forgotten and dispossessed. To see the world as God sees it is to see it from below.

This change of perception is a challenge for congregations tucked comfortably in the safe remove of suburban communities. Moreover, it requires more than the paternal outreach efforts to under-resourced communities that serve to reinforce notions of privilege. It requires more than sympathy and the desire to do good. It requires the kind of understanding that comes with friendship and partnership. I say this as one who lives distant from the daily realities of poverty and marginal existence. But I have friends who live daily simple lives among the poor and, when I spend time with them, I am aware of the myriad ways that I need to be saved from my blind complicity in the work of the powers and principalities.

Proclamation. All of this raises the stakes for what passes for preaching the gospel. *Gospel preaching* is more than just an evangelistic message related to the plan of salvation. In fact, it goes beyond the content of the sermon to its rhetorical purpose, what it intends to do. Gospel preaching aims at naming (unmasking) the world given to us by principalities and powers in favor of a surprising alternative world. As Walter Bruggemann suggests, the preacher of a word shaped by the gospel is a poet whose words surprise with “abrasion and pace,” foreclosing on old worlds and making the news of an alternative evangelical world available.⁶ Too often, preaching seeks to settle things, providing advice for managing the world we already know. Instead, preaching should more often seek to unsettle our worlds for the sake of something that would truly pass as news.

Interpretation. Surprise has become something of a diagnostic category for me in ministry. It has hermeneutical significance when seeking the leading of a living God. Most of us are culturally influenced to evaluate situations in relation to their efficacy. We ask, “Did this work?” We assume too easily that God is the source of a positive outcome. For the sake of the gospel, I am learning to ask a different set of evaluative questions: What happened? What did I learn? What surprised me? The question “Did it work?” falls in line with the expectations we already have in place. Surprise, however, holds out the possibility of a change in perception. If you’re in a strategic mode, managing outcomes according to a five-year plan, the last thing you want is a surprise. But if you’re serving the gospel, a surprise is the very thing you’re looking for. It might be the Holy Spirit disrupting expectations for something truly newsworthy.

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6. Walter Bruggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).