

Surprise!

“Life is full of surprises,” that is something we all know to be true. Some surprises we like more than others; like a surprise visit from a long-time friend or a “just thinking of you” gift unexpectedly arrives in the mail. Other times surprises can be hard, times when we are surprised by the declining health of a neighbour or the unwanted surprise of losing one’s job. Indeed, life is full of surprises, but thankfully more often than not, most surprises are exciting, and joy filled moments. Sometimes, even that thing that surprises us which we feel at first is not that great, can turn out to be a pleasant surprise in the end.

Our faith story is also full of surprises. The Hebrew scriptures are chalk full of stories about people being surprised by God, surprised that God cares or even surprised by their own abilities. The Gospels in many ways are surprising from start to end. It is surprising that the son of God is born into such humble beginnings. It is surprising that Jesus makes friends with fisherman, tax collectors and prostitutes. It is surprising to many that Jesus would challenge the traditional and age-old systems in place. It is surprising that the Messiah is put to death and it is surprising to all, even still today, that God’s unconditional love wins out and death does not have the final word.

It really doesn’t matter where you turn in scripture or in life, surprises abound!

Since the beginning of March, as you are all aware, I have been live streaming worship from my basement. Though it did not have the feel of a church perse, it connected in a time when connection was needed. While in my basement I was close enough to the screen that I could still see everyone’s faces and reactions through out the service; it wasn’t perfect, but I felt close to you all. Starting two weeks ago, I moved the live stream from my basement into the sanctuary of Tofield United Church. It felt great to do so and so many commented how wonderful it was to see a church setting behind me; to be back in a church. I too loved the change, but an unexpected thing happened. Due to my positioning behind the communion table, and the set up of the equipment I could no longer see peoples faces clearly and so the first Sunday back in church, though lovely and good, felt really lonely.

I made mention of that a couple of times over the last week when folks asked how it felt to be back in the building, but little did I know a surprise was in the works. This past Sunday morning (Thanksgiving Sunday) I arrived at the church in Tofield where we are live streaming both our 9am Service and 11am service at about eight o’clock in the morning. I was expecting to arrive to a darkened sanctuary filled with empty pews, but as I walked through the office door, there were faces looking back at me. The pews were filled; filled with the pictures of the members of this faith community. When I say faith community, I now mean that to be a community beyond these walls, beyond the communities of Holden and Tofield, beyond our provincial borders and even beyond a national border. There are pictures in the pews of long-time members like Ruby Sears, who due to her health has not been able to sit in a pew for many years and yet there she is, a pillar of our community of faith. There are pictures of families from Holden sitting next to families from Tofield, something that rarely happens and yet there they are. There are pictures of people whose very first experience of worship with this community of faith was online due to Covid19; people who have never stepped foot into the actual buildings of our faith and yet there they are. There are pictures of members of my family, who have joined us in worship once again people who may never have been able to physically be present and yet there they are. Maybe most surprising of all is that there are people in the front rows!

I became incredibly emotional when I saw the faces of this family of faith in the church with me. You all know that on my best days, I wear my emotions on my sleeve and to see you there with me was a surprise like none other. There was a line in my sermon for thanksgiving that read, "When I look out over these pews, you may not be here, but I see you." I could not get through that line, for I had no idea that that line would be a reality, rather than just a symbol. I cannot thank Holly, Megan and May enough for doing the behind the scenes work of planning and making this a reality. I cannot thank you all enough for sending your pictures, and if you have not done so, please do.

Life is full of surprises some hard, some joy filled. Our faith is full of surprises. Yet even if how it is shared surprises us, what should not surprise us is just how important this community, this family of faith is to us all. The love that is offered to one another, goes beyond the walls of our buildings. It goes beyond beyond our board and council structures and beyond our allocations and commitments. The love that is offered to one another is just as important to those of you who have sat in these pews their whole lives as it is to those who have never stepped foot in these sacred spaces. This community has and will continue to hold one another in love and hope, whether we know each other or not. Life is full of surprises, but the care, hope and love offered by you all to each other and the difference it makes in our lives is not. And thanks be to God for that.

Blessings to you all this wonderful day.

Sincerely,

Rev. Adam Hall