Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
Duluth, Minnesota
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SPRING AHEAD!

Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:12-14

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Spring ahead...Fall back. Like many of us, that's how I keep these annual clock-changing Sundays straight so I don't show up at Pilgrim an hour early - or late! So it was in the wee hours this morning that we sprung into the future a bit faster than usual, leaving a full hour by the wayside. For most of us, it was just an hour of lost sleep, no more. And we more than make up for it this evening with a bonus hour of daylight! Spring ahead! Believe it or not, Spring *is ahead!*

And so is Easter...in just two weeks. Our journey continues through Lent and Palm Sunday and into Holy Week. Through these we need pass to reach the Easter Good News. We need struggle with faith's claims, with the searchings and doubts of our hearts, with the hurts and sadnesses of life and death, indeed, with our very selves - who we are and what we're about. But Easter awaits us, if we but journey on.

In our Pilgrim journey, we've had a busy week. Monday evening our new Stephen Minister trainees had their first class, beginning their six month journey to become commissioned in their service of caring to our Pilgrim family. Tuesday evening the Council met, planning for the Annual Meeting and looking ahead to events next fall. Wednesday the Anniversary Committee continued its shaping of a gala Pilgrim celebration in the coming year. That evening our Long Range Building Committee heard some good suggestions from artist Jan Hartley on how we might tastefully use color to make our entry more welcoming and bring to our sanctuary the colors of the church year. Thursday evening our Long Range Mission Committee developed a statement of Mission and began work on developing some hands-on mission projects here in our community. There's lots of good energy and commitment to the work of the church by so many of our members. Soon these working groups will come to us for input to make sure we're journeying together. In sometimes strange ways - even as we sit around tables - the Spirit leads us as we make our faith journey together.

That journey made me think about our rather strange, unpredictable God. We sing, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform..." and mysterious it often *does* seem! We look in one direction, suddenly discover God in another, or we don't see any sign of God at all. If only God would behave according to *our* expectations, faith would be much simpler!

But the ways of the Lord always have seemed strange, if not baffling. Long ago prophets had warned the Hebrews: "Your evil ways will bear fruit. Judah will be destroyed and your people scattered!" That's right to the point: divine justice would prevail, and that's just what happened. Thus the exiled Jews, resigned to their fate in distant Babylon, could only grieve for their lost homeland.

Then another prophet came along, bringing a totally unexpected message to a people who had lost hope, God's gentle words of mothering love and healing: "Comfort, comfort my people...says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is over, her iniquity is pardoned." To those people who saw nothing ahead but endless punishment for their sins, Isaiah's strange God must have boggled their minds: "I am the Lord, *your* Holy One, *your* Sovereign [words of belonging, not rejection!]....Do not remember the former things...I am doing a new thing; *now it springs forth*! Don't you see it?" Turn your heads around. Look to the future with hope! *God springs forth!*

Incredible! God, this Almighty God of justice who brought us to this desert of our judgment, now announces our evil forgiven, our exile ended: "I give water in the wilderness...to give drink to *my* chosen people," to God's grieving, thirsting people! An amazing story of a most peculiar God, who reverses our every reasonable expectation!

But aren't we the same? We like to package our understandings neatly and absolutely: good is good and bad is bad. God punishes the evil and blesses the good. Life is so much easier to define that way! We don't have to worry about gray areas, ambiguities, inconsistencies. Everything - especially our notions of God - fit neatly into compartments.

While this may be our temptation - and the practice of some of our fellow Christians - realistically we know that life just isn't that simple! Nor is God! God also has had a way of using strange people in strange ways.

Take Sarah, wizened old desert chieftain's wife. She laughed in God's face when God told her she would bear a child. Laughed all the way to the Maternity Unit - where she rejoiced in *God's* strange ways!

Take Moses. When God called him to lead his people out of slavery, Moses tried over and over to weasel out of it. But this strange God named Yahweh persisted, and you know the great story!

Take Jesus, peasant child, born in a remote stable to an unwed teen mother. [Would today's Contract for America have assigned him to an orphanage?] But in time this child would grow up and be anointed God's Son, Messiah to the world of humanity. Totally illogical!

Take Paul the apostle, by his own admission a rounder of the first degree. Once vicious persecutor of the first Christians and devout Pharisee, he became the greatest advocate of the living Christ, and in the process began churches far and wide across the Roman Empire. How strange for God to appoint this Paul Ambassador for Christ!

Or take you and me. Not particularly faithful, often rather casual in our commitment to Christ's way. Yet *we* are called! *We* are invited to follow in the way of a strange God who hasn't given up on us or on the humanity *we've* despaired over so many times! We may spurn that invitation repeatedly. We may stubbornly insist on doing our own thing first. But strangely, the Lord keeps at us, till by some miracle of grace our shell is cracked and God breaks through. And *that*, my friends, is what Easter dawning is all about! Spring - new life - ahead!

But why in the world *us*? Simply because we are God's people, and at some point we acknowledged that. Indeed, once upon a time, each of us made a faith confession, however firm or wobbly, that joined us with that people. When we did that, we connected not with a group that boasted privilege and virtue, but with a strange way that asks us to set aside "me first" priorities and allow the Christ-spirit to enter our lives.

Of course, it's always tempting to let this "belonging to Christ" stay superficial. So our lives *have* been touched? What do *we* do about it? Mouth the right words to show our godliness? Make the right moves to show we're "good Christians"? Or do we recognize that we slip and slide repeatedly, that we need all the love and mercy God can spare us? And we need each other's love to nourish and support us. Then a feeling of needing and of being needed breaks through, and we know hope.

Occasionally, I return to Dag Hammarskold's words that remind me how God just might touch us in strange, unexpected ways and moments:

"I don't know Who - or what - put the question.
I don't know when it was put.
I don't even remember answering.
But at some moment I did answer "yes" to Someone - or Something -
And at that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful
and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal." (from *Markings*)

Such are the strange workings of a God whose ways are not our ways. Together, then, we praise and thank God for the gift of this day and all that blesses us in it - whatever the morrow may bring. And whether our wicks burn dimly or brightly, together we *can* offer this world a measure of light. Isn't that what we're about in Pilgrim church - and in every people seeking to live faithfully?

So we spring ahead. Like Paul, we press on in the spirit and way of Jesus, that the world may be touched a bit by his compassion. As we journey together, take along this vision of the great theologian-paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin:

"Someday...after mastering the wind, the waves, the tide and gravity,
we shall harness for God the energies of love.
And then, for the second time in the history of the world,
humanity will discover fire."