

APRIL FOOLS

I have always loved to read books. I read books of all sorts- science fiction, fantasy, alternate history, spy novels- really almost anything other than mysteries and romance novels. In non-fiction I read history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, business books- again my tastes are widespread.

But one thing I don't like to read is the newspaper. For one thing, I don't like to get the printer's ink all over me. For another, almost every paper I've ever read has a line at the bottom of the column that says, "Story continued on page 4a," so I'm always having to flip back and forth between pages to read the paper. I used to read the sports section if it was about a team I liked, or maybe look up a movie or television show, but since the advent of the internet, I don't even do that.

But there was one edition of one newspaper that I used to await eagerly. Like many universities, Auburn university has a student newspaper. It's called the Auburn Plainsman. Each year, during the first week of April, the plainsman releases an April Fools edition. As you might guess none of the stories are legitimate.

None of the stories were real. The headlines would read, "Island natives in the South Pacific worship Howard Stern as a God." Or "Auburn Tigers T-shirt found in Pharaoh's tomb". My personal favorite was, "Marine Corps successfully captures Panama City Beach during Spring Break." Almost always there was a story attached to the headline and at the bottom it would say, "see Marines on page 4a." Of course, you would turn to the cited page and the rest of the story wouldn't be there. There were even bogus adds for bogus products. The Plainsman April Fools addition was always a lot of fun. I don't know if they still do it, but I hope they do.

April Fools is fun. I guess there's a part of all of us that likes to play jokes on others. Surprise is an emotion that all of us experience from time to time. It's strangest of all emotional responses, because it isn't uniformly negative positive. When it's pleasant, it's very pleasant. When it's unpleasant, it's very unpleasant.

There is at least one surprise- one giant April Fool's surprise- that God plays on all of us. It's a surprise with cosmic implications, and as improbable as it might sound, it's no joke. In fact, as we will see in a moment, it isn't just one surprise, but many surprises wrapped into one. Every one of the surprises is detailed here in this passage from Act.

Now, just prior to this story, Acts 10 tells the story of a vision that Peter has. In the vision Peter is tempted to eat any number of things that are considered unclean according to the Jewish dietary laws. When Peter refuses, he is told never to call anything made by God unclean. At the conclusion of the vision he is instructed to go to a certain house and greet a man named Cornelius, who is a Gentile. Cornelius has had a vision of his own, and he has been instructed to come to this house meet Peter. This is where we pick up the story and discover the first of many surprises.

The verse begins, Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him." Now, if you had lived in first century Palestine, this would be a surprise to you, because Jewish doctrine of the day taught that God did show partiality. God blessed the Nation of Israel. God made covenant with them- and them alone. They were his people. They were elect. The rest of us were unclean.

But Peter says something different here. God shows no partiality, but in every nation the one who loves God and does what is right is welcome. This is huge. There are examples in the scripture where individual Gentiles are welcomed into the community, and even declared righteous, but a blanket invitation is never issued. This may not seem like a big deal to us, but this is a huge surprise in that world. It's important to us, 2000 years later, because it shows no matter who we are, where we are from, or what we have done- no matter how unclean we may think we are- we are welcome if we love God and strive to do what is right.

The next surprise is that Jesus comes preaching peace. The messiah wasn't expected to do that. Quite the contrary, the messiah was supposed to be a conqueror who would restore the dynasty of King David. Jesus doesn't do that he is neither a general nor a political figure. Yet, this King who conquers nothing except the human heart and sits on no throne save the one given by the father in heaven, is the Lord of All. Surprise!

The next thing we are told is that Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power. This is surprising, because from the point of view of the person in the street, there's nothing particularly special about Jesus. It surely surprised everyone, that a carpenter from Nazareth of all places, turned his back on even that modest station in life, and became a prophet. Prophets lived hard lives; they often lived on the verge of poverty. As such he would have had next to know social currency. So, it's surprising to hear that God would anoint such a person. Yet, that is exactly what happens.

This tells us two things. It reinforces the notion that God can choose us no matter who we are. That, in fact, God chooses us based on factors different from those we would use. He doesn't choose based on money, power, or genes. He chooses based on the heart. Second, if you remember that Jesus is God Incarnate, it might surprise you to think that God would come in such a form. Why not come as a king? Or a temple priest? Or a great general? Or a philosopher? Wouldn't you influence more people that way? In fact, many prominent religious founders did come from a higher social station. Mohammed was the son of a merchant. Buddha was a prince before he gave up everything. Not Jesus. He came from a humble background. He came as a worker.

We are also told that he was put to death hanging on a cross. The Romans this form of capital punishment and they reserved it for on group of people: traitors. This is irony; the truth is we are the traitors. Yet, Jesus was killed by traitors like us. He was almost dead, he wasn't mostly dead. He was dead.

So, we are then presented with perhaps the greatest April Fool's joke ever played. Jesus didn't stay dead. The Bible says, "40God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead." Jesus was raised from the dead.

Because of that our sentence of death for our treason is commuted. That is, perhaps, the most joyous April Fool's joke ever told. We are traitors against God, but God loves us anyway and forgives. You don't get condemned. You get to live. You get access to God. You get to be called children of God. April Fools!