



08: Expect to be Surprised

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode eight, expect to be surprised.

If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. If you're in a season of transition of waiting, of general fogginess, or if you've ever searched how to make a decision on the internet, well, you're in the right place. As I've mentioned before, I have a volatile relationship with airplane travel. Every time I'm in an airplane during takeoff, I am one part convinced the plane is going to crash and another part stunned that my childhood dream of flying has come true. It's the same event that causes both thoughts, fuzzy terror, and breathtaking awe.

Sometimes I feel them at the same time. Recently, I was on a plane that took off at sunrise lifting us up right along with the morning, take off is my least favorite part of the whole flying situation and tends to be the part where I have to focus intently so as to keep the plane in the air. I noticed the sky outside my window as we lifted up and it was lovely to be sure, but I had the very important work of clenching my fists and breathing in deep so as to keep that airplane climbing.

What would that pilot do without me? I do not even want to find out. But then as the plane continued to climb, we made a sideways turn and the scene outside the window changed from dark early morning sky to smokey cloud magic, cotton candy color, pinks and golds I've never seen before or since. Glory showed up on the other side of the glass in ways I couldn't possibly explain or expect. I'm sure in some area you can relate to gripping the edge of your seat in an airplane, or your kitchen, or your church, or your car holding on for dear life because you don't know what will happen next. And that can be the worst part, the not knowing. But then a glimpse of glory you didn't expect, her perfectly timed phone call, his warm smile, a note in the mail, a kind word from a stranger, the sun rising up to kiss an airplane window.

And you see it, even though you weren't looking for it. You were given it, even though you forgot to ask for it. A reminder that you are not invisible. A reminder that God has not forgotten. That glory is everywhere, all the time, peeking out from behind warm eyes, tired hands and pink clouds. We can be so busy willing airplanes to stay in the sky that we miss what might be happening right outside the window. Today's short collection of stories will be I hope for you, a gentle invitation to turn your head from the illusion of control, the kind we often have when we're considering our next right step to see a different reality on the other side of the glass.

It's 2014 and I'm in Tennessee for a gathering hosted by Andrew Peterson in the rabbit room. It's called

Hutchmoot And it's a weekend of live music, delicious food, and a series of discussions about art, faith, and the telling of great stories. I've come alone. Someone gave me a free ticket, gifted to me by a friend of a friend who couldn't make it last minute. The tickets to this particular gathering actually sell out in minutes each year. So to have one is a mini miracle in itself, much less to have a free one. I wasn't sure what to expect while I was here, but I knew it would be good. Yesterday I sat in the back as Luci Shaw read her poetry. I took copious notes listening to N. D. Wilson talk about faith and art sat in utter fascination, as Charlie Peacock humbly offered his perspective on fame and the culture we live in.

One of my favorite moments so far came as I sat in the back of a crowded room, cookie in hand and notebook on my lap, listening to Sally Lloyd-Jones, playfully read stories in her delightful English accent. It's the end of the gathering and Andrew Peterson closes with a story about a pastor who had a window in his office that was a two way type of window. He could see out, but others couldn't see in. One day is that pastor was working a mother passed by with her two children. She was on the phone and stopped in front of the window, looked at her own reflection while she talked, not knowing the pastor could see her on the other side. It was obvious her face wasn't pleased with her own reflection, but her two kids also noticed themselves in the window.

They caught a glimpse, but quickly leaned in cupping their hands to the glass, immediately seeing the pastor there on the other side. At precisely this point, Andrew ends the story. This is how he closes our weekend together. Leaving us there with the distracted mother on the phone, her two children cupping their faces to the window. I deeply appreciate his decision not to wrap that story up for any of us with a moral or an explanation. These are people who are not afraid to leave things open-ended. Now I don't know it yet, but I'm about 24 hours away from a quirky serendipity that I would never know to ask for but I'm so pleased to receive. But first a little background.

It's hard to put into words what happens in the heart of a 17 year old girl who longs for life to be poetry and beauty. And then finally, someone comes along and says it's true. It was my senior year of high school and I showed up late to youth group that night. I didn't know it, but a guest musician was on the schedule to sing. And the minute I saw her up there, her deep set mysterious eyes holding more stories than she ought to know at so young and age. Well, I knew something was about to happen. She picked up her guitar, her small frame, nearly disappearing behind it, and she began to sing. She didn't just sing notes, she sang story. For years after I first heard Sarah Mason sing that night in the youth group room of Highland Park Baptist Church in Southfield, Michigan, I found odd ways to use short lines from her lyrics as headings in my own journal and as subject lines in email.

I know it sounds weird, but at the time it was a small form of expression. Quoting her lyrics were my first timid steps and to discovering words of my own. Her music was the soundtrack of my freshmen and sophomore years of college and later aligned from her song Tuesday became the inspiration and title of my blog and later one of my books, *Simply Tuesday*. It's possible many of you haven't heard of Sarah Mason. Some might say she either missed or is still waiting for her big break. That she had some success in the late 90s, but then she disappeared. But it all counts.

All the work she did and is still doing all the time with her children and working with her hands. And especially for me, that night she decided to show up to sing for those insecure high school kids, it certainly wasn't a glamorous gig to perform at a youth group function, but I'm so glad she said yes to it because I was one of those insecure high school kids walking in late, sitting in the back row, touched by the

generosity of her artist's heart and her simple refusal to draw conclusions for us.

Maybe it isn't about waiting for a big break, but about taking something that is alive within you and allowing it to touch the broken spots in others. Sarah's music did that for me that cold night in Michigan. It woke something up within me that hadn't yet been touched. She didn't tie up loose ends or draw conclusions about my faith. She simply shared her own, showed up and offered her art with generosity, and then let the listener decide to receive it or not. I wasn't looking for inspiration that night, but there it was, mine for the taking. I went on to graduate from that small Michigan school went to college for a few years in South Carolina and then transferred to a school in North Carolina. And that's where I was years after that first encounter with Sarah Mason when I got word that she was in my town to do an outdoor concert at the baseball park. I had no ticket because in those days I didn't exactly have the foresight to plan ahead for things like that.

The driver's seat of my little black Corolla would be the best seat I would get. So I drove to the park determined to roll down my windows on the street and find a spot close enough to the stadium so that maybe I could at least hear from a distance. I was happy to be there. As it turned out, I could hear the concert from where I chose to sit. Not well, but good enough. But then in the middle of her song come in, a couple of leaving the concert early noticed me sitting small in the front seat of my car and held out an extra ticket they had.

I gratefully accepted and within minutes the gray muffled tones from the street became rich and distinctly colorful tones from inside the stadium. What been background was now center stage. I sat close to the front and enjoyed the music and afterwards she came into the grassy area where I stood and we ended up chatting about how her brother and I went to the same small school in a suburb of Detroit, though not at the same time, about how I remember her from a long time ago when she came to our youth group and saying folksy, poetic tunes from a stool in front and about how I had been a fan ever since.

It's 2014 again and Hutchmoot is over. I'm trying to decide if I should go to church before I leave town. And then when I choose yes, I have to decide which church to go to. I'm not local to the area. So I consult a list that they gave us and choose to attend Church of the Redeemer. And feeling nervous as I walk in as I've been alone a lot in the past few days. And though I like that typically, after a while, it tends to get a little, well, a little lonely. I sit behind a few people I recognize from our weekend together. And after the traditional Anglican service, I feel a little nervous about lunch for some reason, not really wanting to eat alone, the waffling and back and forthness bugs me about myself, about what to do and where to go.

I have a rental car, I should just leave, but I'm hungry for both food and connection. So the idea of finding a restaurant eating alone is less than appealing. As I gather my things in slow motion to buy myself a little time to think, the people in front of me turned around and they simply asked me to join them for lunch. "Come on," they say, "You can ride with us." So I do. It wasn't in the plan and it wasn't my idea, but their simple invitation to ride along and be a part was a gift to me that day. That invitation wasn't required, but was certainly welcome. They couldn't have known I was feeling lonely and who knows, maybe they didn't even want to eat with me. But they asked anyway. And for that, I'm grateful. As I followed them out to their car, I sensed another invitation.

This one more subtle and nearly missed. "Pay attention," it said, "Don't forget to look out the window." I climb into the back seat with three kind people I've only sort of known for a couple of days, feeling

welcome and comfortable, glad to be in conversation, even though we don't know each other well. And after a little bit of a drive, we pull up to a chicken restaurant close to Belmont. And you might not believe me and I promise I'm not making this up, but we pull the car right up next to the restaurant and there in a casual outside table sitting with her husband and family is Sarah Mason herself eating chicken on a Sunday afternoon. I look out the window and remember all the ways her music has shaped my life. I get out of the car smiling. We recognize each other and chat for a bit. I meet her family and we snap a photo together. By now, she knows the inspiration she's been to me.

I sent her some books. She sent me some pottery. We're not friends exactly, but I think we could be. But all that is beside the point because you know this isn't about Sarah Mason. Not really. It's about my continual insistence that I am in control of my own life. It's about the endless pressure I put on myself to make the right choice, the best choice at the right time. But the often the best things that happen are in fact kind gifts that have nothing to do with me. It's about my obsession with clarity and the quick fix and how Jesus often works in small surprises in the midst of the long haul. But he doesn't do it in empty rooms, he does it through people, through connection, through his body, the church. We make our decisions and choose our next steps but we get scared when we can't see the future.

What if we started to believe that our steps are leading somewhere good? What if we started to see God in the yes we say, even though we feel scared, to see him in the random phone call, the kind invitation, the gentle nod. What if we started to see him from the backseat of a stranger's car as we pull up to the chicken place? If we insist on holding onto control, we just might miss the story happening on the other side of the window. If he says he will do far more abundantly beyond all that we could ask or think, then who am I to stop before he gets there.

As we make plans, fill out lists and do the things that need doing, may we remember still to remain open to surprise. Instead of insisting on clear plans, may we be willing to settle in and take the next right step even though it may lead someplace we didn't quite pack for. May we stop insisting that everything have an explanation. Let's be men and women who keep our ears pressed gently against the heart of God, willing to respond to faint whispers and small nudges, because perhaps he is inviting us to be the wink of God for someone else.

Thanks for listening to episode eight of the Next Right Thing.

I was grateful for your response to our last episode, faithfulness, fame and the gift of obscurity. In fact, the artist I talked about today, Sarah Mason is someone who so beautifully embodies that reality, who has turned away from the allure of fame and chosen a different way. Her choice has intern had a profound impact on me and many others. If you want to hear more about the struggle of doing the next right thing because you're waiting for the next big thing, tune in to episode seven. You can find out more about that as well as get access to the show notes and a full transcript when you visit the nextrightthingpodcast.com. In today's notes, I'll share a photo from my airplane window during that morning flight when glory showed up right on the other side of the glass. The photo doesn't really do it justice, but it's still worth the look.

As of this recording, we're two reviews away from 100, and I'd love to meet that milestone this week. To those of you who've left reviews for this podcast, thank you for that. And if I haven't thanked you

personally yet, I'd like to. Find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or at emilypfreeman.com. And let me know you left one. It would be my pleasure to thank you directly. So today, if you feel a bit scattered or confused about the events of your life or what your next right step should be, if you have a lot of loose ends, but are unable to tie them up, receive these words from Psalm 139, as a reminder that you are seen and you are loved no matter where you go. "If I were to ascend to heaven, you would be there. If I were to sprawl out and [inaudible 00:15:39] there you would be. If I were to fly away on the wings of the dawn and settle down on the other side of the sea, even there your hand would guide me. Your right hand would grab hold of me."