Over the years I have learned that vacations can hold unexpected surprises. This one was no exception. We saw the usual assortment of beach and ocean dwellers: dolphins, manitees, starfish and a host of other critters. But nothing prepared us for the newcomer to the beach. It might be helpful to know that in our particular beach area, dogs are not allowed on the beach. So it was with great surprise that just the next beach over an elephant appeared at the shoreline. It seems a woman whose house was on the beach and who had a birthday party had rented an elephant for 4 hours for $3500. I wondered how she had gotten the variance to allow the animal there. After all which animal is easier to clean up after!

In life we can expect that the unexpected can and probably will happen. Is it too much to expect that the unexpected can happen with God? How many of us have experienced miracles in our lives? How many of us have seen the awesomeness of God break in upon us when it was least expected: the appearance of an unusual double rainbow, a rare bird appearing within a few feet of us, an unexplained mystery or sense of divine presence, an unexplained occurrence that saved someone from imminent disaster. How many times have we found solutions to insolvable problems or found an unexpected moment of peace in the midst of turmoil, or clarification on something about our faith that has puzzled us?

The truth is that God is working behind the scenes to break in upon us unexpectedly at moments when we most need Him. But often we live our lives of faith not believing that the unexpected could or would happen. We have trouble giving up our control or relaxing enough into God's presence to make room for God's unexpected events that deepen and grow our faith and the faith of others, or help us through our difficult situations. We tend to think we have to fix things ourselves without giving mind to God. So we often forego the help and sustenance and nurture that God so willingly offers.

Here is the remarkable thing about our faith! Jesus prepared the way for us to have access to God. Sin is no longer a barrier to God. We can freely access God when we need to or want to. God is available 24/7. And we don’t need an intermediary; someone who we think has more clout, to approach God for us. We can do that for ourselves no matter how angry we may be at God, or how doubtful we feel, or how inadequate we think we are. And if we feel too afraid to approach God for any number of reasons, we can approach the Spirit of Jesus within us. Faith is a matter of knowing that God is with us and knowing that in some way God is going to respond to us and to our needs. Some of us feel it’s easier to pray to God and others believe they need to pray to Jesus. But either way God responds.

A friend of mine has lung cancer. She is currently going through her 3rd round of chemo and radiation. Each round has left her a little weaker than before. She is at the point where she no longer expects the unexpected. She is discouraged and does not truly believe that God cares anymore, or that God will help her through her rough times. The pain and tiredness continue to overcome her. Yet she still wants prayers said for her. She feels that maybe God will listen to someone else, since he seems to have stopped listening to her. She is at a critical point in her faith journey, just on the edge of rejecting what she sees as a silent, unresponsive God. She does not see the glimmer of hope that lies in believing that God can do the unexpected, that God can open her eyes and her heart to the possibility of life beyond this physical world, that God can and will give her the faith to know that this physical life is but a shadow of the eternal life that has been promised. I carry her hope for her, something so many of us can do when we have an acquaintance going through such pain and loss. My hope and prayer is that there will come a day when she will see that God is still with her and her faith will blossom again and lead her to the place she needs to be.

Have we stopped believing in the possibility of the unexpected happening? Have we stopped believing that God can do remarkable things in our lives to move us to greater faith and enable us to change the world? Have we stopped believing that God is actively participating in our lives?

The Israelites had given up believing in the unexpected during periods of their being a people of God. The people had become slaves in Egypt, living under extremely harsh conditions. And God did the unexpected. He sent Moses to free his people in quite an unexpected way. The people later were sent into exile for turning away from God, then God did the unexpected and sent them back to their promised land. The religious hierarchy became hypocrites, making religion and faith in God too hard for the common person to follow. So they stopped believing and left the religious stuff to their religious leaders. But God did the unexpected. He sent Jesus to turn them back and make it possible for individuals to approach Him on a personal basis. He showed them how to live the lives they were intended to live.

Just this morning I encountered the unexpected. In the pile of mail waiting on my desk I noticed a magazine and an article about reading scripture slowly and deliberately, ponderingly, and I read about this unexpected happening in the life of the daughter of the author of this particular article. His youngest daughter, a college student called and talked about her experience just moments earlier. She had been involved in an emotionally charge conversation with a fellow student. She confessed that at one point she felt ready to go at it with full force, using her intellect energetically and forcefully to prove her point. Unexpectedly, she silenced her argument and simply listened to the other student. Her adversary began to soften his angry tone and began sharing more deeply and personally, to the point of tears. Listening, not speaking proved to be the instrument of understanding and transformation. The unexpected had happened.

Are we prepared to let the unexpected happen? Yesterday, flying first class thanks to a mothers day present from Joe, I settled in for the 2 ½ hour flight. Dinner orders were taken, and I had the chance to have a salad vs a spicy burrito sort of thing. I heard the fellow behind me order a salad as well, but I had taken the last salad available. He was verbally disappointed and complained about the lack of preparedness for meals for first class. I suggested that I would be willing to give up my salad for the burrito, since all I really wanted was just something to eat. The stewardess, who was put out by the man’s rudeness, agreed to make the switch. I got my burrito, he got his salad and not a thank you or acknowledgment exchanged. At first I felt a little angry that he could not even acknowledge my generous offer. But decided to let it go, chalk it up to the man’s personality. Later, after disembarking the plane in Chicago, I proceeded to start the long journey from terminal C to terminal E. Shortly into that journey I heard a voice and felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around I saw the unfriendly, ungrateful man holding a cup of Starbuck’s coffee in his hand. “Here, this is for you. And Thanks for the salad. I hope your burrito was Ok. And he walked away. I stood for a moment, sipped the coffee which turned out to be a delicious cappachino and gave God thanks for the unexpected exchange. My hope for the human race had been restored, my long journey to the other terminal lightened.

I wonder where the next elephant on the beach will be for each one of us in the days ahead. What wonders will God unexpectedly spring upon us? I think sometimes we just have to let go of our biases, prejudices, angers and disappointments to let God do His work.