

## **"Great Expectations"**

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First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, February 3, 2013**

### **Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 71:1-6 New Testament Lesson – Luke 4:21-30**

Shortly after I first sensed the call to become a pastor, I told my Dad, "I'm thinking about going to seminary to become a pastor." He said, "I don't see why you would do something like that." Now, my first instinct was to get defensive and even combative, saying something like, "You never did understand me!" But from somewhere outside of my normal way of being, I was able to respond saying, "Well, Dad, I can understand that. We've never talked about it before. Maybe we can do that soon." We never had to – he accepted and embraced my calling from that moment on.

Now I'd love to take credit for the wisdom, self control and sense of peace that delivered me safely to the other side of that confrontation. But it was not my own. All I did was back off a bit on my preconceived expectations of how my Dad and I typically get along, and allow God to direct our relationship.

We never know what things might be like when we go home again, reunite with old friends or family – perhaps combative if we assert our agenda and fall back on our old ways of being, our old expectations. But maybe something new is possible.

Maybe, even in the face of those who know us so well, God can raise up in us – and them – a new way of being, create new expectations for how things might turn out. We might call these new expectations hope and faith.

In our New Testament lesson today, we have no idea what Jesus was expecting when he returned to his home town of Nazareth. But throughout it all, we can be sure that he kept the faith, set aside his own expectations, and opened himself up to where God would lead him.

Following the will God, Jesus enters the synagogue, where he is handed a scroll to read – it's of the prophet Isaiah, where God promises to send a deliverer, the Messiah, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, all of it through the power and grace and mercy of the Lord.

Jesus finishes reading, rolls up the scroll, and says to those gathered, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And Luke tells us that "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Until they realized this was Joseph's son; that this self-proclaimed Messiah and messenger of God is none other than their own little Jesus, who grew up right there among them.

And all of a sudden, Jesus' "gracious words" are not enough for them. If they're going to believe God's messenger, they expect to have the proof upfront. "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum they demand." And when Jesus does not, Luke tells us that everyone "in the synagogue (is) filled with rage."

From amazement to rage. From being pleased to being upset. From embracing to rejecting. From love to hate, peace to war, contentment and happiness to discontent and despair. We have all made similar moves in life.

We have all been in jobs, relationships, and friendships that have gone from good to bad. We've all found ourselves feeling great one moment and suddenly, something's terribly wrong – our health is failing, depression sets in, we just don't feel like our old selves, and there's nothing we can do about it. Or with the people and things in our lives, we just don't see how to repair the relationship, move past the friendship, recapture our passion for the old job or the courage to find a new one. We can't seem to find that sense of peace and hope in the midst of our material or mental or emotional struggles.

The distance between happiness and discontent is spanned by a single word – expectations. If we let go of our own expectations, we can be more open to how God might lead us to happiness. But to do that, we need to come to terms with the fact that our health will eventually fail us, and that's OK; that our loved ones will disappoint us, and that's normal, that the car will break down or the job run its course or our savings will begin to shrink, and that in all of this, it's just a part of life and that God is still there for us. If we come to expect and accept that such struggles are just a part of life, then our sense of peace and hope and faith will carry us through.

Jesus showed up in Nazareth, perhaps not sure what to expect. And when his own people reject him, he accepts it. He doesn't fight it; he comes to terms with it. Jesus comes to know in a very real-world way that, as he says, "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown;" that it's hard to be accepted for what's possible in the future among people who know you only for what's happened in the past. That's just life – and we all experience it.

Through Jesus' experience of returning to Nazareth, God speaks to him and through him. And the same is true for us. God speaks to us and through us in the experiences we have. When things get rough, God is telling us to soften our hearts, or go in a new direction, or take comfort in our faith. And when we dig in our heels based on our expectations, that's when God gets a little pushy, and our expectations go right out the window.

Regardless of what people expected based on the healings Jesus did elsewhere, God had nothing for Jesus to do in Nazareth except to declare the coming of the Messiah, and to call on the people to have faith and believe. And when Jesus has done this, Luke tells us that "all in the synagogue ... (get) up, (drive) him out of the town, and (lead) him to the brow of the hill ... so that they might hurl him off the cliff." Already, Jesus is being led to his death. "But," as Luke records it, "(Jesus) passed through the midst of them, and went on his way." Even as earlier as that, death had no power over Jesus.

Likewise for us, as Christians, death has no power over us, whether it's the end of a job or a relationship or a friendship or our good health or whatever. The only way these things have power over us is through the force of our own expectations and the weakness in our lack of faith.

The people of Nazareth expected miracles out of Jesus, and he offered them faith instead. Well, maybe not instead, but certainly first and foremost. In Jesus' ministry, time and time again, we see that it is your faith that makes you well. The miracles of Jesus come from faith, and not the other way around. We mustn't demand proof before we step out in faith.

This is precisely why Jesus would not or could not and surely did not perform any miracles for the people of Nazareth that day – because to offer miracles as a way of gaining our faith is to not offer faith at all, but rather proof.

And God works in the realm of faith, not proof. And here we are, demanding the assurance of proof, instead of trusting our hearts when we know the truth. God can speak to us clear as day – through prayer, through friends and family, through Holy Scripture or other writings, through the expanse of the universe or the delicacy of a snowflake – God can speak to us clear as day, and still we refuse to believe and to act on faith.

I mean, ask yourself, why is it that if someone tells you that there are billions of stars in the universe, you believe them; but if they tell you the wall has wet paint on it, you have to go and touch it?<sup>1</sup>

Just like we can't touch a painted wall without ruining it, we can't demand proof of God without damaging our faith. Our task is to come to know and to trust in God anyway.

In her poem "The Coming of God," Ann Weems says, "Our God is one who comes to us in a burning bush, in an angels song, in a newborn child. Our God is one who can not be found, locked away in the church, not even in the sanctuary. Our God will be where our God will be, with no constraints, no predictability. Our God lives where our God lives, and destruction has no power, and not even death can stop the living. Our God will be born where our God will be born, but there is no place to look for the one who will come to us. When God is ready, God will come, even to a God-forsaken place, like a stable in Bethlehem. Watch," says Weems, "for you know not when God comes. Watch, that you may be found. Whenever – wherever – God comes."

Where might you find God to be in your life, ready to work a miracle? If you were to just move out in faith, rather than waiting for the proof where would God lead you? What has you frozen in life, right now, unable to make the next move?

You're experiencing upset, when all God wants for us is joy. Maybe you're overwhelmed, when all God wants for us is peace. You're lashing out, when all God wants for us is companionship. You're struggling, when all God wants for us is blessing upon blessing.

This is all God wants for us, and yet we find ourselves more committed to the struggle, and lacking faith in the blessing. Me, too. So God speaks to us through our struggles and our blessings. And those who have faith, hear God's voice amid the struggles and the blessings. They do whatever it takes to get past the struggles, because they have faith in the blessings.

Spend some time this week thinking about that one area of life that has you struggling, has me struggling. What would it take to move past it, what negative expectations need to be set aside?

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<sup>1</sup> From Kimberly VanWagner, via e-mail, December 31, 1998.

And do you – do I – have the faith to move past them, and in that, to discover, an unseen blessing, just waiting there, for you. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

In these moments of stillness, O God, as we gather our hearts for prayer, we confess that we don't always come before you with confidence. Our petitions lack courage, –and fear and doubt create holes in our certainty and hope.

Give us a glimpse of the possible as we still our minds to make room for you, O God.

Grant us the courage to reach out and just brush our hands gently against your cloak. Open our hearts in this silent space ... that we might hear your voice say, "Do not fear, only believe."

We do believe, O god. We believe in your desire that we have find joy and peace in all situations and at all times, even if it's the quite joy of know you, and the peace of your presence in the midst of our struggles.

Thank you, God, for coming to us in Jesus Christ, and for working your will in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in this Spirit and by Christ's name that we come before you now, lifting our voice as we sing the prayer that you taught us.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.