

It Won't Be the Way You Expect

Luke 21:25-36

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the next few weeks, you will have countless opportunities to become reacquainted with a young man named Tiny Tim. He, along with Ebenezer Scrooge, play key roles in *A Christmas Carol*, the wonderful novel by Charles Dickens. "God bless us, everyone."

This fall I have been reacquainting myself with another little boy from a Charles Dickens novel. His name is Pip. He is the central character in the book *Great Expectations*. Pip is the orphaned ward of his short-tempered older sister and her husband Joe. Pip is apprenticed to doing the dirty work of the forge and dreams of one day becoming a gentleman.

As I started to pray about a theme for this year's Advent season, I was drawn to that book because of its title: *Great Expectations*. That is the title I have chosen as the theme of this year's Advent season. Here's why:

- As I have been reading the Scriptures in our lectionary throughout this fall and into the months ahead, I keep reading about what the Jews expected from their coming Messiah, and what we Christians expect as we await the second coming of Christ. Both expectations are key Advent themes.
- Did you know that there are over 100 verses in the Old Testament alone that talk about the coming Messiah. It feels like we have read every one of them this fall! Verses like our Old Testament reading today are an example:

In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line ... (Jeremiah 33:15)

- Or even today's Gospel reading:

At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Luke 21:27)

The Old Testament. The New Testament. Everyone has GREAT EXPECTATIONS. And those GREAT EXPECTATIONS did not stop after the last New Testament book was written. Christians today are still filled with GREAT EXPECTATIONS about how and when and why God works in our lives and in this world.

The core reason why the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah was that His coming was not consistent with their GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

- They had a specific picture of what the Messiah would look like, and what the He would do, and how He would act. Quite simply Jesus did not match the picture. He didn't meet their GREAT EXPECTATIONS.
 - You and I look through the rearview mirror at the same Scriptures they had, and we wonder "Why didn't they get it?" and "That's obviously talking about Jesus."

- But that also got me thinking about my own expectations about God and my relationship to Him ... about what I expect Him to do when I pray. Or the way in which I expect Him to tell me what His will is. Or the way I can be sure that He is with me.
 - In other words, I think most of us have some pretty clear GREAT EXPECTATIONS about how God ought to do His job!

So I asked myself: Where have my GREAT EXPECTATIONS caused me to be like the Jews of old? In other words ...

Where have my Great Expectations kept me from seeing what God is actually doing? What do I miss because I am expecting something else?

So that is what we are going to focus on this Advent, both in our Sunday morning worship and in our midweek services as well. Today we start the series and today we begin with this thought:

God is unpredictable! Whatever you are expecting God to do likely won't happen in the way you expect.

Our three texts give us three examples of this truth:

1. In the reading from Jeremiah, the people are told to expect a Righteous Branch who will rule over the house of David.
 - They expected a king – someone who would be a ruler over their nation and restore it to its former glory.
 - But Jesus did not come as an earthly king. His kingdom is a spiritual one. He rules not on a throne in some capital city, but in our hearts.
2. In the reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul told his readers that, God willing, they should expect him to visit soon so he could help them grow in their faith.
 - Paul expected that, too, so he gave his readers a “to do” of things he wanted done before he got there.
 - But God had other plans, and Paul's visit was restricted to writing another letter -- 2 Thessalonians – which helps every Christian grow in their faith, not just those Christians in that first century city.
3. And in the reading from Luke we are told about certain “signs” people should expect to see before Jesus returns.
 - It reads like a checklist of expectations:

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea... “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. (Luke 21:25, 32)

God has not fulfilled any of these three things in the way the people who first heard them thought He would. They had GREAT EXPECTATIONS but God did not do it the way they expected. He did it another way.

That leads me to two IMPORTANT TRUTHS for us today.

TRUTH #1: GOD OFTEN HAS A DIFFERENT (AND BETTER) PLAN

Go with me to the book of Isaiah chapter 55.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

When the children of Israel got hungry in the desert who would ever have thought about the wind blowing in quail every day ... for 40 years ... in an amount sufficient enough to feed a million people? God ... My ways are not your ways.

When the disciples came to Jesus and recommended that He dismiss the 5,000 men plus women and children so they could run go into the nearby town to get some Chik-fil-A, Jesus instead multiplied a little boy's lunch and fed them that way. My thoughts are not your thoughts, declares the Lord.

Who could ever imagine that the sins of every human being in the history of human beings – past, present and future – could be forgiven by God becoming flesh (incarnate) and dying on a cross as the perfect one-time-for-all-time sacrifice? Only God. “For my ways are higher than your ways.”

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. (Proverbs 19:21)

We have lots of ideas – GREAT EXPECTATIONS – about how God needs to work, don't we? I have often wondered if God sits in heaven and laughs at some of our plans.

- Chik-fil-A? Really? Why would we send the 5,000 into town when we have plenty of food here?
- Hey angels! Listen to this crazy idea Tom Brodbeck has now!

Ruth Bell Graham was the outspoken wife of evangelist Billy Graham. She was once asked if God answered everyone of her prayers. She quickly responded, “No. If He had I would have married the wrong man many times.”

The great challenge for us is the same challenge faced by the Jews and by the early Christians. With every ounce of our being, we have to resist the urge to so lock in what we EXPECT God to do that we miss it when He does something completely different.

One of the favorite illustrations of my predecessor Pastor Powell is the story of the man who was stranded on his roof because of a flood. He prayed that God would rescue

him. Soon a boat came and offered him a lift. “No thanks,” he responded. “God will rescue me.” Later a helicopter flew over and dropped a ladder, but he turned the effort down for the same reason. “God will rescue me.” When he later complained to God about still being stranded, “God responded ‘I sent you a boat and a helicopter.’”

- He missed what God was doing because he expected something else.

I recently re-learned a method of praying that I think helps me in this endeavor. It's called “Palms Down. Palms Up.” Whenever I take a request, a confession, a need or a concern to God, I picture it in my hands and then turn my hands over. Palms down, as if I am dumping on the floor – turning it over to God. Whenever I think about a promise He makes, I turn my palms up to receive it.

- This helps me remember to turn over my GREAT EXPECTATIONS and watch for how He chooses to respond.

TRUTH #2: GOD KEEPS HIS WORD

From today's text we read:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Luke 21:33)

Growing in the Christian faith means learning to be less concerned with HOW we EXPECT God to do something and more confident in the fact that He WILL DO IT however He sees fit.

Genuine faith means believing God will always be faithful, even if we don't understand the “how.”

When the angel appeared to the Virgin Mary and told her that she was about to become a mother, Mary had one simple question:

Mary said to the angel, “But how? I've never slept with a man.” (Luke 1:34)

See the GREAT EXPECTATION? There's only one way for such a thing to happen, right? The angel offered another possibility, and Mary responded in faith, believing God could and would do what He said:

I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say. (Luke 1:38)

Abraham, too, understood the biological process, and the writer of the book of Romans reports:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him... Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, (Romans 4:18-20)

APPLICATION

One commentator wrote this:

Even the clearest of signs can be missed by those who are “weighed down with the worries of this life” (v. 34).

So the great preacher Vince Havner encouraged his congregations to:

Don't look for signs. Listen for sounds. The trumpet call of God and the shout of the archangel. (Vance Havner)

Let's be content to believe that God will and not be concerned with the how.

Amen.