
Grate Expectations
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
September 13, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16

[image: warren clock]

In the opening of the 2002 movie *About Schmidt*, Warren Schmidt is about to retire from his lifelong job in insurance. The movie opens with Warren sitting at his desk beside a pile of packed boxes. Watching the clock tick away - second by second - towards 5 o'clock. At which point he leaves his office for the last time ever. While he waits, he looks disappointed. As the movie unfolds, we come to see that his disappointment is based on his expectations about retirement.

[image: warren desk]

Warren's wife, Helen, has forced the purchase of an RV, and Warren expects - but is not looking forward to - spending a lot of time on the road. Warren's daughter, Jeannie, has met her soul-mate, and Warren expects - but is not looking forward to - her wedding. At Warren's retirement party, his replacement speaks highly of Warren, and hints that he may need to consult with Warren from time to time. But Warren is worried about not feeling needed when he doesn't have a job to go to.

But life rarely unfolds as expected. When Warren drops by the office after his retirement the "new guy" is not interested in any help Warren has to offer. Even worse, on his way out of the building Warren sees his carefully organized boxes and files - the symbol of his entire career - unopened, in a garbage pile. Shortly after his retirement party, Helen, dies. In his grief, Warren spends time with her personal effects. He discovers letters that reveal that years earlier, Helen had had an affair with Warren's best friend. At Helen's funeral Warren finally meets his daughter's fiancé. This only confirms his belief that his daughter "could have done a lot better" in finding a husband.

So in the early parts of the movie, Warren's goes from a very predictable life to a life of great uncertainty. Warren loses his job, then his wife, then his best friend. All that he has to look forward to is an increasing sense of separation between himself and his

daughter as she gets married to someone that he strongly disapproves of.

I wonder if that's how the Hebrew people felt in our story today. In that mythical story the people were leaving slavery, but they were leaving many other things too - they were leaving a known world behind. A world where they had occupations that gave their lives meaning. A world where they had homes, friends, and all of the normal things that make up life. A world where they knew what to do when they woke up each morning. Like in Warren's story, perhaps they were not in love with every aspect of their former life. But it was *their* life, and that gave them a sense of comfort and meaning.

[image: flakey]

In today's reading, there is a particular focus on the idea that in Egypt, the people had plenty of food. This is in contrast to wherever they are wandering now, where the people are starving. In the story, God provides food for the people. But oddly, they don't see it. They don't understand it. They don't recognize that what they see - the fine flaky substance - was food. That's why in the story Moses has to tell the people "it's food".

The people complained because they thought they did not have what they needed to thrive, and yet - it was right in front of them. Can you imagine such a thing! Well of course we can because we do that all the time ourselves. In our collective defence, I would point out that it is hard to recognize something you are not expecting to see. And our gospel reading today provides us with a great example of this. At least for me it does. The story just seems so wrong. It goes against almost everything I was raised to believe. It goes against my expectations. Jesus shares a view of the Kingdom of God as a place where all workers get the same pay - regardless of how long they worked. Regardless of whether they worked through the heat of the day. What happened to "the early bird gets the worm"?

[image: success]

What about the American proverb that says, "Success is a ladder you cannot climb with your hands in your pockets"? What about the adage, "The only thing that comes to us without effort is old age"? Or this one - The only place that "success" comes before "work" in the dictionary.

[image: try]

And - my personal favourite - “The difference between ‘try’ and ‘triumph’ is a little ‘umph’.”

We expect to work for things. And we expect that we get rewarded for our efforts. So where does Jesus get off saying that all the workers - those who worked all day and those who worked a few minutes - should be payed the same. To our modern ears this story just seems to be let’s be honest ... it seems unfair. Even in the Exodus story, God provides food for all, the workers, the dreamers, and hackers and the slackers. Is that fair? I did not agree to those terms and conditions when I was born!

[image: terms]

That’s why I titled this reflection “Grate Expectations”. No - that’s not my computer acting up again. I meant “grate” as in expectations that grate on us. Or perhaps it’s reality that sometimes grates on us. Or maybe its both. But what do we do when reality doesn’t meet up to our expectations?

Classically, there are 2 answers. The more popular answer is that of course *our* expectations are perfect, it’s just that reality has failed us. Other people have let us down. Our governments have let us down. You can make your own list of who has let you down. Things that are out of our control just didn’t work out. Personally, I’m really let down this week because Apple has delayed announcing its new iPhones. That is supposed to happen during the first week in September you know. Life can be so unfair.

The other answer - the less popular answer - to the question of what we should do when reality does not live up to our expectations - is to realize that perhaps our expectations are not perfect after all. Perhaps our expectations are not even helpful to us.

[image: expectations]

Blogger “MaryAnn” of simplemarriage.net says, “A good working definition of expectations is planned disappointment. ... When what we expect to happen does not happen, we are disappointed and we suffer pain at some level. ... Ironically, we are also likely to be unhappy even when our expectations ARE met!”¹ That’s because we are not overly happy when good things happen - if we expect them. To feel truly grateful, we usually need something good to happen that we do not expect. “Gratitude is the key to

¹ <https://simplemarriage.net/expectations-equal-unhappiness/>

happiness and anything that undermines gratitude must undermine happiness. And nothing undermines gratitude as much as expectations. The more expectations you have, the less gratitude you will have.”²

[image: grated cheese]

And what about us? What about our expectations? Perhaps we feel like we are wandering, like Warren, or like the Hebrew people. Perhaps we feel like we have left a situation where we at least knew what to expect. I still have a lot to learn about the history of this congregation, but I know that we have a collective memory about a time when we had a larger congregation, a larger choir, and a better-looking minister! Many of us here can look back to a time when life was different. And perhaps we even long for that former life. In the words of Chilean writer Michaela Bruzzes, “Like the Israelites, our faith often gives way and we find ourselves longing for the comfort and security of spiritual slavery, someone telling us what is right and wrong, what to do, where to go. We long for a ‘Santa Claus God’ who will allow us to remain spiritually passive and dependent, not a God who demands our input and active effort to maintain the covenant.”

Even in our recent history we might long for our past. You and I have only been together for 8 months, and even during that short time we have said goodbye to Amy, and Charlie, and Bill, not to mention all the implications of COVID-19. It is natural to yearn for our past. And that’s ok to a point. But we should not let our yearning for the past interfere with our ability to see the present - or the future.

The people in the exodus story did not recognize the food that was right in front of them because they were looking for the wrong thing - they were look for the food they had in Egypt. But nourishment was right there with them. We need to do the same thing ourselves. We need to learn to see the nourishment that is all around us, knowing that it may or may not look like nourishment we remember from years ago.

This is such an exciting time to be in the church, don’t you think? As the needs in our community change, and as our own needs change, we are invited to imagine what church can look like in 2020. The pandemic has forced many activities to go online, and that has allowed us to stay connected with members who don’t live in Brantford. Online

² Ibid.

is challenging for some people unfortunately. But it has also broadened our participation. If the church is open when flu season hits, people who are too sick to come to church will still be able to participate online. The pandemic has forced us to reconsider what it means to “be church” today. But let’s be honest, that conversation started many years ago. We were in transition long before anyone heard of COVID-19.

We may yearn for our past - for lots of good reasons. But Jesus calls us to something better. Something deeper. This week I tried to find a Bible story where Jesus tells the disciples to gather people together so that they can fill pews in a particular building once a week. But I couldn’t find that story in the Bible. I could have sworn that story was in there somewhere. I tried to find a story where Jesus tells the disciples to get people to dress up and play nicely with others 1 hour every week. I couldn’t find that story either.

In our gospel today, Jesus calls us to create community where all people have enough. Jesus calls us to a Kingdom where we are happy to all be paid the same - because we are all paid enough. A living wage - and I mean that in every sense - financially, physically, mentally, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. A Kingdom where we all share and have enough. A community of love, caring, and compassion. That is a model for what the church can aim to be and become in 2020. Pandemic or no pandemic. We are called to a much higher vision than simply filling pews. Thanks be to God.

The food we need to thrive is all around us. It might look like isolation. It might look like a pandemic. But it is all food to drive us towards being a community of love. Moses had to tell the people, “it’s food”. I say to us, “it’s new life”.

In the movie About Schmidt, by the end of the movie we realize that in the process of losing everything that was important to him - Warren finds something new that he cares about. Before Helen died, he is channel-surfing he comes upon an advertisement for an agency that helps support children overseas - similar to World Vision. He sponsors a single child. And the agency tells him that he should write to this child. And so Warren writes to the child, Ndugu, throughout the entire movie. And through that process, Warren not only gives life to a child, he finds his own new life too.

God provides. But God does not always provide what we expect. Let us look - together - with fresh eyes at ourselves and our community. We will find new life. And if you don't know where to look, start with gratitude. And the last step is perhaps the most important. We need to share those glimpses of new life with each other.

I'm so glad to be with you as we discover this new life together.

Amen.