
Lent: Give up your expectations
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 55:1-9 and Luke 13:1-9

This Lent we are working around the dual themes of temptation and giving up something for Lent. And by giving up something for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to our lives, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow us to find new life. Important things that may help us connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that may help us understand the word “resurrection” in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our lives would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - me wanting a new bicycle with hydraulic disc brakes. But in truth, for most of us what will make our lives better is usually NOT having more. For most of us the thing that would make our lives better is to have less. But less of the right things. Less of the things that weigh us down. Less of things like negativity, resentment, anger, being judgemental, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority. Or perhaps something else that is causing you pain. Giving up something for Lent actually makes good sense.

That was the opening paragraph from last week’s sermon, but I really felt it was worth repeating. Mind you, I’m probably wasting my breath here. Last week we discussed giving up our need for control for Lent. I’m sure we all took that message to heart and have already radically reformed our lives and found deep inner spiritual peace, right? I’m sure that this week, there is nothing left to discuss.

Or perhaps dealing - at least in part - with issues of control, you have simply been brought face-to-face with another barrier, a new wall. Perhaps this week there is a call to give up something else for Lent. Perhaps we need to give up something else to help us in our need to give up control?

I propose that this week - we give up our expectations. If you are confused by the word “expectation” then good for you. Because our society uses the word differently in different situation without hesitation.

[image: expectations - hamburgers]

For example, many people view expectations as the root of all of our unhappiness. Shakespeare famously said, “Expectation is the root of all heartache.” One Alcoholics Anonymous document refers to expectations as “premeditated resentments”. The Sufi poet Rumi said, “Whenever we manage to love without expectations, calculations, negotiations, we are indeed in heaven.” Adding expectations to love takes us from heaven to some other place. There is certainly a lot of truth that if you have no expectations in life you will never be disappointed.

[image: expectations - hair]

On the other hand, many people believe that expectations motivate people to challenge themselves and to grow. You can’t go a day in town without seeing a bumper sticker that proclaims some version of, “Expect the unexpected, believe in the unbelievable, and achieve the unachievable.”, or the classic, “Shoot for the moon, even if you miss you’ll be among the stars”.

[image: expectations: titanic]

So are expectations good or bad? I’ve certainly met many youth for whom expectations caused them to strive to become better people to create a better world. And I have certainly met many people (often older) for whom expectations just make them crotchety. Is it really just the case that young people have great expectations, but actual life beats that out of us as we age, forcing us to either give up our expectations or become bitter? Surely there is more to it than that. Perhaps we don’t even know what we should expect from our expectations? What are your expectations of your expectations? And if you get that figured out, what are your expectations of your expectations of your expectations?

[image: expectations: going bald]

Perhaps at this point you just think Rev. Paul should give up preaching for Lent. But in truth, we should grapple with our expectations as part of our Christian faith. Faith is about how we live our lives, so expectations are an important part of that. Besides, both of our scripture readings this week display expectations. The text from Isaiah speaks of an expectation of a land of milk and honey where you do not need money to purchase

things. And the text about the barren fig tree - that is only found in Luke - pushes back on the idea that some sinners are more special than other sinners. It's like Jesus asking - what have you done for me ... lately?

[image: expectations: cat dishes]

I hope this is not news to you, but Christians hold different expectations of our faith, and most of them are biblical. And to see this, you do not even need to read from both the Old and New Testaments. You do not need to read all four gospels. You only need to read the epistles written by St. Paul to see wildly different expectations.

[image: parousia 1]

Take 1 Thessalonians, the first book that was written in the New Testament. St. Paul states flatly that we are waiting for the return of Christ to take us to a heavenly place in bodily form. From chapter 4, "For the Lord, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever." (1 Thess 4:16-17) This was not written as metaphor. This is classic Jewish apocalypticism. The text describes what is called the "parousia", where the faithful are bodily sucked up into heaven. This story is about the expectation of a physical "life boat" rescue, where human bodies will be sucked up in to the clouds and taken to a physical heaven.

[image: parousia 2]

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. In chapter 15 it says, "What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (1 Cor 15:50-52). This story is about the expectation of a "spiritual resurrection". Where we will change - perhaps our bodies will die - but our spirits will live on. "at the last trumpet" - which is at some time in the future - our spirits will be rescued and taken to heaven. It's like the parousia except that we become spiritual beings. This is what Christians call the

rapture. And many Christians expect that even to happen very soon, as they have always done.

[image: complex junction]

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote Galatians. In chapter 2 it says, “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:19-20). This story is about the expectation of living a spiritual life perhaps in the future but perhaps right now. The expectations are a bit unclear actually. The words are convoluted, because St. Paul’s thinking was evolving and he was struggling for words.

[image: helping, connecting]

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote Romans. In chapter 6 it says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. For whoever has died is freed from sin.” (Rom 6:3-7). This story is about the expectation of living as Christ - ourselves, today. This expectation is no longer about the future at all, or any concept of parousia or heaven or rapture. The only expectation is about living today with the understanding that Christ is present in us, with us, and through us. Just as we say here when we extinguish the Christ candle at the end of every service.

[image: coffee expectations]

This in part explains why there are different Christian messages from different churches and different preachers. If your faith is driven by a future expectation of going to heaven - good for you, because that message is biblical. And if your faith is driven by the idea that we live in the present tense, that the whole point of faith is to experience the peace and the presence of God right now - not in some future - good for you, because that message is also biblical.

[image: finding peace]

Stories in the Bible do not agree on what Christians should be expecting. But Jesus - whose words are usually much more to the point than St. Paul had a few things to say about expectations too. Particularly about expectation around finding peace. Inner peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding. Jesus said, "I come that you might find peace, and find it abundantly". And from the gospel of John - as I say at every funeral I conduct - Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." This week in our weekly email I offered to demonstrate an exercise for finding inner peace that is almost a literal take on that passage. It also involves our expectations.

But first, there is one more thing I have to say about expectations. I hope you have enjoyed the images I've shown during this sermon that contrast our expectations with reality. In every case, the images showed expectations that was far better than reality. And I think that is often true. But sometimes, reality is better than our expectations. I scoured the entire Internet and could not find an image depicting that, because humans are so pessimistic. But reality is sometimes far better than our expectations. And we often miss that because we are too busy nit-picking.

I remember when Marjorie and I were new to Richmond Hill, we decided to check out the movie theatre in the mall. The theatre had 6 screens. So we decided to go watch all 6 movies over 6 weeks. We ranked the movies according to our expectations. And we watched them in that order too. Which meant that we were dreading week 6. Because on week 6 we were going to watch the movie for which we had the lowest expectations. And I remember enjoying the movie. Yes, it was silly, almost moronic, but it did exceed my own low expectations. And more to the point I can honestly say that I enjoyed the entire evening out. I'm sure you want to know what the movie was. First off, I can tell you I have no idea what the 5 other movies were. I have no clue. But I still remember that the dud of a movie that contributed to that pleasurable evening was the 1992 movie "Mr. Baseball". Please don't hate me.

And now, as advertised, we have a short demonstration of one way to find peace in your life. What follows are not the actual words I used, but it outlines the process. The process goes a bit like this:

[image: cabin]

Introduction

- You want to come home to yourself, whatever that means for you.
- Perhaps you are looking for peace, joy, happiness that does not fade.

Setup

- I tell you I know a short exercise that may help you.
- It only takes a moment, but you have to come into my cabin to do it.

Self-Preparation

- Before you enter the cabin, please leave your mind behind.
- By “mind” I mean all your ideas about life, what life is or what life should be, and all the ideas you have about yourself.
- We live with many ideas about ourselves, but they change all the time. Leave all of this before you come inside.
- Leave behind any desires for the future, for yourself or others.
- The exercise will only take a moment, and you are free to pick up your mind later when you leave the cabin. Nobody will steal it while you are inside the cabin.

Arrival

- When you feel you have left your mind, come into the cabin and close the door.
- I won't be giving you any new ideas. Nothing new here.
- You may be feeling, “now what?”. There is no “now what”.
- Just as it is. You are only here.
- You are here. Your senses are here. Your power to perceive is here. Your ability to experience is here.
- Experience being here as your self, stripped away from expectations. No projections here. No judgments. No stories. You are only here.
- Are you at peace? What day is it? What time is it? What religion does this

experience belong to? Do you even care about these questions?

This Lent, give up your expectations, and you just might find peace. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Amen.