

Crushed by expectation

Part 1 of a series: *Steady now. There's hope for us. There really will be something to celebrate!*

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 5, 2010: The Second Sunday of Advent.
Based on Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12.*

*Coming up: Advent 3/When patience is not enough./James 5:7-10.
Advent 4/Christmas: too much intimacy?/Matthew 1:18-25.*

Years ago, I had the privilege of being part of professional group where members could bring cases and incidents from their work. We talked in a secure setting, and shared our common professional perspective so that we could grow in our ability to do our jobs.

The respect that we felt for one another allowed us largely—not completely, but largely—to put aside our competitive streaks and really listen to one another. We could practice both sympathy and empathy and, at the same time, challenge one another.

One member of this group was a puzzle to the rest of us. He had a reputation for running a great institution. He was, we thought, the brightest of the lot. He was hard-working. He was successful, even envied by his peers. But he always seemed to be restless. He was hard on others and even harder on himself. Nothing was ever quite right or good enough.

One day he came to the group looking like a changed person. A symptom of that change was that he said nothing for the whole session, uncharacteristic to say the least. When we had finished the day's case, the convener asked, "Anything else for today?" Our quiet friend said simply, "I learned the most astonishing thing the other day. Before I was born, my mother had given birth to a first son. He was the first child to be born to both my sets of great-grandparents, and the first son in the family for generations. He was said to have been an unusually beautiful baby and he, therefore, carried huge hopes of his proud parents and grandparents. And then, at six months old, he died. And with him, his name and his memory. No one ever spoke of him again."

There was more. From a relative, he learned this: when he was born, he was given the name of the dead child. "My parents loved me and they gave me the best," he continued in that quiet, changed way. "They challenged me in the right way, of course. But with them, nothing was ever quite good enough. Not the nearly all A's in school, not the track ribbons, not the high SAT scores."

Then, sort of looking down, he said to us, "What I've learned is that I've been living for two. I have had to carry the hopes and the dreams and the expectations of two sons. No wonder I, and my achievements, were never quite enough. I didn't even know about that brother, let alone know him. But, I was held to a standard of his potential life as well as my own actual life."

As you might imagine, there was a profound silence as we tried to take in what he was trying to take in. Over the next months, we watched and we saw that it was not easy for him to change a lifetime of habits and expectations. It never is. Don't let anybody ever tell you that change, including changing expectations, is easy.

So, how about you? What expectations do you live by—or under?

A blogger whom I consulted this week said, "Unrealistic expectations are what everyone else but you would call your life goals." Like most blogging wisdom, that's a little harsh.

Most of us make promises. We start relationships. We work for other people. We otherwise live in an inescapable net of expectations. Like the fears we talked about last week in the first sermon of this Advent series, expectations have to be faced and sorted out. The real ones from the imagined ones. The ones you've legitimately embraced versus the ones that are so deeply unconscious you don't even know what they are. Like a dead brother, or an unspoken hope, you never knew of.

I saw once that a colleague of mine had posted a sermon title, "Expect Great things from God!" I never heard or read the sermon, but for years I wished that I had preached it. I liked the positive sound of the title. But, is that a set-up? Are we setting up God the way we often set up ourselves? Because we do set ourselves up for pretty dangerous expectations—like believing, for example, that your friends on Facebook are really a list of your friends.

Big time expectations. It is interesting to hear how we talk about them these days. "I never expected to be this old," you hear people say, and then, in the next sentence, "I really don't look so old, 60 is the new 40." Or this time of the year, a particularly pernicious expectation is that I need to buy one more thing. I need to give one more thing. I am expected to give at a certain level. So, what's one more charge on my Visa card?

I don't know that these are cosmic expectations, but I know this: they come across as bargaining with the universe—and maybe worse, as delusions. And they quickly become burdens that we carry around, expectations that can snuff out what's real, using up the energy we have for living.

And how often do you see people beat themselves up because they've expected one way for their life to go and life is going another way? They don't really have a way to think about it. They can't find some faithful response to that.

Unreal expectations can work on us another way. Suppose you do expect great things of God, or your idea of God. Suppose you grew up, for example, taking the prophecies and the promises of various Bible

verses more or less literally. You got to know those people in the Bible and you trusted what they said. That can take you into dangerous territory if life works out along a different pattern of facts. Most of us here would likely scoff at the guy who's sitting in upstate New York predicting the end of the world on May 27, 2011. We know many other people who have named a date and it hasn't worked out very well for them.

But I'm not talking about these easy targets, people we can dismiss lightly. I'm talking about a really deep intuition of God—or whatever your name for God is. I believe our species is wired for something bigger than just the facts that we can test. I'm talking about the ways that reality can be taught—or distorted, or re-shaped—so that God becomes a kind of cosmic puppeteer, pulling the strings of your life. Or, God made into a machine where you ask for favors and it dispenses them.

If that's your God, sooner or later, by some thinking process, some living process, some emotional process—or just the accumulated evidence of life—that image of God has got to go. That “God” can crush a lot of expectations. If that isn't true, what is true? And that odd mixture of personal and social expectations that you put together for the world as it should be, is not the world as it actually is for you.

In the religion business, we deal with this all the time. People come here, expecting for example that the Church will be made up of people who love one another. Then they get on a committee, or the Vestry, and they find otherwise. Or, they meet characters like me, and they expect that we will be pure and priestly and pastoral. Then they find out that nobody can be quite that way.

I think it is true that, if you've had a Sunday School education, the chances are that you haven't moved far beyond that. When you hear the familiar words, ideas and pictures of God, they don't stack up very well against where your life has likely moved.

And that means that one reason that you can be crushed by or disappointed by expectations is that growth has not taken place. Failed expectations are part of the human drama. *The God I know is a God who expects us to fail—and loves and accepts us nevertheless.*

There's a human dynamic—in other words—in the unfolding story of our faith. The Bible, you could say, is a tapestry of stories. They're woven together in different times and places. And with attention, you can learn to read this as a series of experiences of people inspired by God, expecting great things of God, and then disappointed by those expectations. But turn the page, they're still there. They keep on keeping on.

It all began in a garden, we're told. A beautiful garden where the first human beings had everything they could possibly need. And then, turn the page: it turns out they can keep the garden only if they live by the sweat of their brow. Their ancestors—*us*—find a world we can live in and make something of only if we obey the laws of its nature. A community liberated from slavery in ancient times can possess its life, its life its land and its liberty only to the extent that it lives by the rule, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And, of course, for us this tapestry of meaning culminates in the Jesus tradition. That's the tradition that gets me moving. And here again it's important to separate the fixed—and sometimes distorted expectations—that can be created about who he was, what he taught and stood for, from the real core of what it was that he was promising.

Jesus was a person of expectation. He dreamed. He pulled back the curtain on a dream called the “kingdom of God.” He awakened in people a deep expectation. Then he said, *Here's the thing—you have to work with me to build it. I don't have a magic wand.*

When we hear the voice of John the Baptist, as we do in Advent every year, as we did this morning. It seems to shout off the page. After all these two thousand years, we are hearing his and other prophetic voices crying about the need to rethink—that's what repent means, “re-think.” Crying about the sorry state of humanity but also evoking a vision—an expectation of a better world and a better life. “The hopes and fears of all the years,” says the Christmas carol. We are being fulfilled in the Son of humanity—a complicated person who would say and do things that would give us our hope again because he was telling the truth. Not every expectation is going to pan out for you.

Years later, the Christian community saw that had been foretold long ago. I want to quote the words (From Carl Daw's paraphrase of Isaiah, in Hymn 597) that we sang a few minutes ago:

*Then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb, nor shall the fierce devour the small.
As beasts and cattle calmly graze, and a little child shall lead them all.
Then enemies shall learn to love, all creatures find their true accord,
The hope of peace shall be fulfilled, for all the earth shall know the Lord.*

Like my colleague years ago, you need to take an opportunity to see if you've been living a self-defeating set of expectations, or have even been crushed by them.

You need to develop, together with others who are here, a vision of personal fulfillment that includes the struggle and disappointment that is part of every person's script. To learn to cultivate those tender shoots in the prophet Isaiah vision until that they grow into something—a world of wisdom and understanding. A spirit of the knowledge and the awe of the Lord where the wolf shall live with the lamb—and yes, a little child shall lead them.

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