

ON THE TIPTOE OF EXPECTATION; LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22; BAPTISM OF JESUS; ORDINATION/INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS; 1.10.10 THY/WPC

Expectations have a way of getting in the way. I recall meeting my uncle when I was twelve at LaGuardia airport from which we drove to his weekend home in Vermont.

He was the proverbial rich uncle – dropping in to see us in Pittsburgh from his world tours; showing us the town when we went to visit him; staying in his fancy Manhattan apartment complete with butler, maid and chauffeured Rolls Royce.

So when I met him at LaGuardia and we walked to the parking lot and got in a very nice Pontiac I was shocked. “Where’s the Rolls?” I blurted out, thinking there must be some mistake; the uncle I knew could only drive a Rolls Royce. In the split second that followed, I was surprised and embarrassed by my own voice as if somehow I was with the wrong person. “I’m retired now,” he said matter-of-factly, “I can’t afford it.”

Expectations have a way of getting in the way of our seeing the world as it really is, other people for whom they really are, seeing even ourselves.

I’d like to consider today our expectations for God, Jesus, the church and our personal lives and also suggest the possibility of letting some of them go.

Luke says, when Jesus was baptized “the people stood on the tiptoe of expectation.” That is, the society was filled with expectations of a coming conquering-military-hero-messiah. But Jesus did not fit those expectations. Indeed, much of the account of his life is how seriously people missed getting who he was because they were looking for someone else.

Why was it so difficult for them to adjust their expectations? In part, because there seems to be a human tendency to see or use our expectations as a way to control the world.

David Brooks brilliantly makes this point in an op-ed piece entitled “The God That Fails” regarding the terrorist plot to blow up an airliner on its way to Detroit. He says Americans used to be more flexible and forgiving of their institutions.

Before WWII, he says, Congress and the Federal Reserve worsened the Great Depression and the military made horrific mistakes during the war which led to American planes bombing American troops and American torpedoes sinking ships with American prisoners. But there was a realistic sense then that human institutions are necessarily flawed. People used to understand that history is not knowable or controllable. Mistakes happen, we do the best we can, and each of us has our own responsibility.

But these days, says Brooks, we seem to expect government and institutions to be flawless; and if mistakes are made it’s OK to throw temper tantrums.

Admittedly the attacks of 9-11 made us feel more vulnerable than we’d ever felt – maybe even during WWII – so we built our faith on the god of technology and expanded the nation’s information gathering. We set up systems to process information by computers and bureaucracies, linked agencies and created new offices.

All of this effort and expenditure has reduced the risk of attack but neither is the system perfect, nor history knowable before it occurs, nor people always predictable – so the system is bound to fail sometime.^[i]

What Brooks helpfully reminds us, that speaks to our theme today, is that control-driven expectations around the potential of security technology or the idealized image of a messiah or a spouse or teacher or President for that matter often easily become a fixed reality without our realizing it.

And when that happens we fall into the trap of worshipping homemade gods that fail to prevent the things we fear or deliver the things we demand.

From the day of his baptism to his dark hour on the cross Jesus defied attempts by his disciples, the people and religious authorities to confine and dictate his life with their expectations. In the gospel when he stoops and washes his disciples' feet God is being redefined as God, not just in power and glory but in service and suffering weakness.

When someone asks, "How can you believe in God with all the suffering and heartache in the world?" the question perhaps reveals a limited idea of "God."

The God who was in Jesus reconciling the world through service and suffering rather than a "supreme being" God who is always in control, whose essence is unconstrained power is not the most attractive image of God in a culture that worships self sufficiency and personal power. ^[ii]

Following the God Jesus depicts goes against the deepest grain of our consumer-driven, control-oriented lives.

If you doubt this consider the last purchase you made on the internet. The shoes I bought for our trip to Israel were the result of a web search that compared detailed minutia of about five brands of walking shoes, including reports from people who owned the various models I was considering—leading me to expect very great things if not perfection from the shoes I purchased.

North Americans have probably always had a skewed idea of how much they can shape and control the world, yet technology, wonderful as it is, has only enhanced our expectations and the illusion of control from the material to the spiritual.

Sages through the centuries in many of the great religious traditions counsel that the best approach to a happy, rewarding, well-lived life is to let go of our expectations altogether, to enter each day with no expectations but only grateful hearts, thus making room for God's will and our response in our lives.

While it may take a disciplined practice to 'let go of our expectations' and simply be in the moment; this would, it seems to me, prepare us for a deeper encounter with Jesus. There's much, I think, we have to 'let go of.' That day Jesus was baptized he made it nearly impossible to hold onto our old ideas about humans and God. Never again could people think "human being" or "God" without thinking of Jesus.

But we have trouble with this. Apart from our need for an all powerful supreme being and messiah, the notion of Jesus as fully human and fully divine is not easy to grasp. It took the early church centuries to come up with an acceptable formula that could even entertain the possibility.

It is far easier to err seeing Jesus as one or the other than it is to entertain both human and divine at once, holding them together, equally in tension.

The old 'Jesus either human or divine' heresies persist today. The modern idea that followers of Jesus got carried away with their grief after his crucifixion and started believing that he was divine is absurd.

You can't get from wise teacher to the church spread over the globe with that logic. You can't explain the 83 year old Chinese bishop who spent 28 years in a prison under Mao because he refused to cut his ties to the Vatican or the 15,000 underground worshippers in his parish inspired by his example and their faith.

The only plausible explanation for such occurrences is that Jesus was a wise moral teacher *and also* the Son of God, the Beloved, the Messiah in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. There is no lack of the man Jesus in God and no lack of divinity in the man Jesus.

Which leaves us with a "rational impossibility" that can only be entertained with intellectual humility, a willingness to let God be God incarnate and close to us, rather than a god designed to meet expectations that quench fears or conform to scientific skepticism.

It is a lifelong task to let ourselves be shaped by a God present to us in Jesus, fully human and divine. ^[iii]

Maybe you're wondering "How far can I trust a 'rational impossibility'; how far can I trust open-ended, imprecise definitions of God." But what if Jesus is true? What if we don't know much for sure about God except what Jesus reveals to us?

It may be that we need an attitude adjustment; it may be that our expectations are not only too high but too limited – maybe God isn't whom we presumed God to be, or we the fearful creatures we supposed.

There is a paradox here that brings God down to human terms and in doing so expands the possibilities for experiencing the holy in our daily living.

We're getting ready to go to Israel this week. I remember the first and last time I was there I wasn't sure what to expect. But what I found was that my cathedral-sized notions of Jesus had to be re-imagined. The sheer human proportions of the sites we visited – the location of the Sermon on the Mount which turns out to be a mere hill; the Sea of Galilee which turns out to be a modest-sized lake; the upper room which even by first century standards was a small room helped me to grasp Jesus in human terms on a human scale – not as some ethereal superhero.

The result was I began to see that if God could operate in such humble places and circumstances then the possibility of God at work in my life suddenly found traction; if God could be found by illiterate, unknown 1st century fishermen why not by me?

Our new elders and deacons are coming onto the boards of this church at a time when urban congregations are seriously challenged by the current economic forces and profound human needs and disparities in urban America.

I can't imagine God as a supreme being, always in control, whose essence is unconstrained power being of much relevance to such challenges. But the God who was in Jesus evokes all kinds of creative possibilities for what we are here to do – if our expectations don't hold us back.

Yesterday when I met with our new elders and deacons there was a consistent theme around the table: they see themselves in their personal and spiritual lives as “works in progress”; none of them thinks expecting perfection from themselves or the church or God is a good thing.

I’m confident that they’ll do their best to lead and ask us what it means to follow not so much an all-powerful supreme being but Jesus Immanuel, God with us.

For our part the only way we’ll be able to follow such leadership is if we let go of expectations that keep God in heaven and humans from risk or danger.

When my uncle said that he could no longer afford the Rolls I had to adjust my perception of who he was – no longer the ridiculously rich relative who had limitless resources but a very real human being who happened to take a serious interest in me at a critical time in my life.

If I had to choose, I’d choose the real human being who reached out to me over the guy who merely drove a Rolls Royce and fulfilled my illusions of wealth.

Perhaps that’s not unlike the choice we have when it comes to our expectations for Jesus and God – the divine being who doesn’t let anyone get hurt or the holy one of Israel who loves us so deeply that not only can she not bear to be apart from us but chooses to struggle and suffer alongside of us. Amen.

^[i] David Brooks, “The God That Fails,” *The New York Times*, Op-Ed page, December 31, 2009

^[ii] Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 38, No.1, Year C, January – March 2010, 9-11.

^[iii] Willimon.