

“Great Expectations: One Who Brings Good News”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

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We are people who live in multiple worlds, and it is most often the case that these worlds stand in contrast to each, if not just down right in opposition to each other. It's genuinely hard for us to be consistent, to feel put together, to simply not go nuts just trying to be our self.

To me, the season of Christmas is a time when our world's most glaringly stand in contrast. For instance, think for a moment about how you approach Christmas expectations in your families and how you approach Christmas expectations as a matter of your faith.

Christmas expectations for families in my experience have usually included the overriding concern of not raising our expectations too high. When I was much younger and I had an admirable list of desired presents to pass on to Santa, I remember my parents saying over and over “Don't get your expectations up too high now, Santa can't get everything for every kid.” I remember one year in particular when I asked for a new, gold painted sting ray bike with a banana seat. My parents told me multiple times each day that they didn't know if Santa would be able to bring me that bike. By the time Christmas rolled around I was certain I wasn't getting the bike. But on Christmas morning, when my brothers and sister and I raced downstairs, there was the bike. I couldn't believe it. I rode it in the kitchen, the basement, and the living room. It was so incredible. My expectations had gotten so low that when the gift was given it felt no less than miraculous.

When it comes to much that happens in our families over Christmas I think most of us employ the “don't get your expectations up” tactic quite a bit. We keep a lid on how we will get along and we keep a lid on our emotions. We coach each other about what topics not to discuss, or not bragging too much and even how long we can hang around before we wear out our welcome.

While most of us get genuinely excited about Christmas and all its wonders, we do as Woody Allen often strategizes – “Seize the gifts, avoid the pitfalls and get home by 5:00.”

Consider then what Christmas expectations are like for us spiritually.

What comes to us biblically and religiously regarding Christmas is the dramatic raising of expectations. There is a drumbeat that pulses with the amazing things that will and are taking place. There is no psychological strategy to lower expectations so that the gift that finally appears will seem greater than it is. Advent is a season leading to a crescendo that fulfills all of our expectations and there is no reluctance to lay claim to this reality.

Isaiah puts forth a glorious prophetic description of what the Messiah will do. Isaiah, in the 61st chapter, is speaking to his people who had been conquered, sent into exile, were poor, many without homes, who felt abandoned. The Messiah that Isaiah describes is one who will restore the people in all possible ways. The Messiah will proclaim: "... the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to bind up the broken hearted; to proclaim freedom for the captives; to proclaim the jubilee year, the forgiveness of debts; to comfort those who mourn; to bestow a crown of beauty instead of ashes; to pour the oil of gladness instead of mourning. This restored people will rebuild the ancient ruins and renew the devastated cities."

There are no expectations being dampened by Isaiah. The Messiah will do amazing things, unimaginable things, divine things. Every concern, burden and need was to be met by God's elect. Life was to change in cherished ways when the shoot of Jesse sprang up.

So high were the expectations of the people, so deep their embrace of the one who was coming into the world, that they began to let go of all that prevented them from seeing and acting as if the Messiah had already come. They began to let go of their fears, they began to forgive each other's pains, and they began to form a new vision of the future.

Isaiah's prophetic witness was as much about restoring the spirit of his people as it was about the coming of the Messiah – or maybe it was that in Isaiah's vision the two were simply part of the same gift.

Like Isaiah, we in the church are to raise to the heavens our expectations of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Our voice is to be extravagant with hope, possibility and trust. We are to get wrapped up in the promise of Christmas – so wrapped up that what we thought was impossible begins to happen; that what we thought would never change is transformed; that just when we thought there was not enough to go around, suddenly all that is needed pours forth.

I was told a story by Heidi Hooten, the other day. Heidi is the coordinator of the Stepping Stones homeless shelter in Menomonie. Heidi was talking about how full the shelter has been and the situations of the people who stay there. Heidi said she is experiencing an increase in the number of young adults who are homeless.

Not long ago she said a young man of 18 came to her. His family had put him out of the house on his birthday and for a while he had been doing what many of the homeless in our area do, he was going from one friend or acquaintance's home to the next, until he ran out of places. This young man was still attending MHS and wanted to graduate.

Heidi said she tried to help him get an apartment but she said he had poor credit, little income, no references and land lords mostly refused to rent to him. One of the things I love about Heidi is that she has high expectations of what she thinks is possible. If the standard course of action fails she seeks other options.

When Heidi talked to the young man she found out who he had stayed with in the previous months and why he wasn't able to stay longer. She talked to one family who said that they didn't have a room for him, but if they did he would have been welcome. After further conversation it was determined that there was legal space in this family's basement for a room, but it needed walls, insulating and electrical work. With volunteers and some flexible money, a room was created and the young man moved in. He is graduating from HS this month, he has a job when he finishes and he is talking about going to college.

The story of this young man's life and our community is filled with Christmas hope. Despite so much of what created pain and obstacles, the expectation that something could be done was never relinquished. In his prophetic proclamation Isaiah said the Messiah will: *preach good news to the poor *bind up the

brokenhearted *set the captives free *forgive the debts of all people *comfort those who mourn *bestow crown of beauty instead of ashes.

Though we often down play the reality of our spiritual lives, intuitively we know that much of who we are and what we do are guided and shaped by invisible realities. While I believe that we are endowed from birth with human qualities like generosity, hope, compassion, even patience, it is most certainly true that these elements within us need tending, direction and inspirations to flourish.

Though we people of faith tend our spirits all year long, during the Christmas season we tend them in a particular way. And that particular way has to do with letting go and pushing to the heavens, our sense of expectation about the world and our lives. Even though it means moving beyond the practical, moving beyond the realities of life as we have come to know them. Our spirits need to be released and go where they will – to proclaim that God is coming to end all pain and suffering, to end all violence and warfare, to forgive the unforgiveable and make right injustice, to give food and drink to all who hunger and thirst, to bring into community all who are lonely, or sick, or mourning.

There is utter foolishness involved with what I am saying, and there are many voices in our world today who will tell us that faith, God and Christmas are delusions, or crutches, or at worst destructive. I understand some of what they say, but what I also know is true, is that we are spiritual beings. We rise and fall not just on physical food, creature comforts and advanced knowledge. We rise and fall because of our unseen, unpredictable and powerful spirits. We create, endure and share the most amazing gifts of life because of the spirit that is within, among and even beyond us.

Advent and Christmas is the season we tend our spirits by having our expectations increased – not about how many gifts are under the tree, but about the real and amazing transformation of burdened and selfish lives. The baby Jesus, Emmanuel, the Messiah who brings good news is the gift that touches our spirits and lifts them up. This is the most essential gift of Christmas, to have the depths of our lives touched that we might be freed to sing and live beyond what we thought was possible.