

Sunday January 12, 2025
Baptism of Jesus

Meditation: “Great Expectations”

I was thinking of the novel by Charles Dickens this week, ‘Great Expectations.’ While I don’t remember a lot, I do remember that Miss Havisham provided for Pip to get an education. Now I can’t say that I was the best student at that age, so I’m not really sure whether the expectations were the ones Miss Havisham held for Pip, or whether it was Pip who had expectations for his life thanks to the education he received. All I really know is that we all have expectations.

Expectations are more than simply hopes, they are things that we believe will happen. That is what is behind all our New Year’s resolutions, expectations. I expect that this is the year I will finally quit smoking. I expect this is the year that I will finally get out of debt and resolve all my financial problems. I expect this is the year that I will lose weight and finally improve my physical health.

The Israelites had their own expectations. They were thinking and hoping that John was the Messiah. For the Israelites, the Messiah was a person who would be both political and religious leader of the people, like the Ayatollah in modern day Iran, or David or Solomon in ancient Israel. The Messiah was a person who was going to come as a military power and free them from subservience to other world powers; he was going to kick Rome out of Israel. The Messiah was going to transform them from a nation of nobodies into a nation of somebodies. The Israelites assumed that because the Romans ruled over them, that the Romans were somebodies. The flip side of this assumption is that because the Romans ruled over them, the Israelites were nobodies. They were in their own identity crisis, and they longed to be somebodies once again, as they had been in the days of David and Solomon.

As I enter my final year of ministry, I look back and try to remember what my expectations were as I entered ministry. I can’t say that I expected to preside at so many funerals or see so many churches close. I didn’t expect a pandemic or the changes it brought or the way technology has transformed the way worship happens. I didn’t expect some of the nastiness I’ve seen coming from some so-

called Christians. I did expect to be blessed by being at some of life's most sacred moments – baptisms, weddings, in the room as people died, celebrations of lives well lived, community feasts. I did expect to love people, warts and all, just as God loves us, warts and all. I did expect to explore scripture, look for new questions and new meaning, and to share what I had discovered, and to ask new questions.

Expectations are what our forebears were filled with when they formed the United Church of Canada. I wonder what specific expectations the Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Union churches held when they came together 100 years ago? Did they expect to continue uniting with others? Did they expect stagnation and decline, or growth? Did they expect to hold the ear of politicians and to influence Canadian society as they did when they supported the move to publicly supported medical care in the early 1950s, or the move to divest of South African corporations in the face of apartheid in the late 1980s, or to support same gender marriage as they did in the early 2000s? Did they expect to be marginalized and largely ignored due to social changes and the decline in the church?

(By the way, did you know that the first year that the United Church of Canada recorded a decline in membership was 1966, when it lost just over 2,000 members?)

I wonder, what expectations did the founders of Dorchester United Church have when they founded this congregation? What were their hopes and dreams and expectations for Dorchester?

Expectations can come with excitement and energy, or can induce dread and anxiety. Miss Havisham's expectations could have induced performance anxiety in Pip. Could he live up to her expectations? The very thought of speaking weekly, on God's behalf, to a worshipping community can be more than just a little daunting – terrifying is the word I would sometimes use. Church decline can induce a sense of loss of self. If we aren't the centre of community

life, who will we be? Or for the Israelites, who are we under the heel of someone else's boot?

On the flip side, Pip had every reason to expect great things from his life with an education. Indeed, if I remember correctly, he went on to be successful in life. The thought of a promising future guiding Canadian society and helping form social programs, or being God's presence in life's sacred moments, or working to make this a better community to live in are life-giving. The thought of being an independent nation once again was life-giving for the Israelites.

Notice that when the expectations are external, beyond our control, like social change, or pandemics, or other people's misbehaviour, or being ruled over by someone else, that is when there is the possibility of anxiety. When the expectations come from within, seeking to help others through difficult times, feeding the hungry, governing yourself, there is energy and excitement.

Ultimately the Israelites were wrong. John wasn't the Messiah. Even his cousin Jesus wasn't the *kind* of Messiah they expected. Jesus did not liberate them from Roman occupation. Jesus came to free them from their expectations and their assumptions.

Life doesn't always go the way we expect it to. It isn't always sunshine and roses. Isaiah knew that. In the Old Testament lesson for today Isaiah said, "thus says the Lord, 'When you pass through the waters they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire the flame shall not consume you.'" God does not promise that we shall live happily ever after. God promises that we shall walk through fire and water. God also promises that the flame shall not consume or the water overwhelm us.

Isaiah's words are meant to comfort. The message is, 'do not fear, for God is always with you.' We saw that in the gospel lesson. The Spirit of God descended on Jesus. It was not a one-time appearance. The Spirit of God remained with Jesus, in the good times and in the trials, even on the cross when Jesus thought he had been abandoned.

Looking back at the expectations I had makes me wonder what expectations were fulfilled, and what expectations were not. To put it another way, what legacy do I leave from my life in ministry? That is a difficult question to answer. Sure, I know I have helped some in times of grief or crisis. But I can never know what long term impact my ministry had on people, especially when it may take years to become obvious to the individual, which likely mean years after I have left a community.

This year the United Church of Canada is looking forward to the next 100 years, and it is also looking back at the first 100 years. That looking back is a look into the legacy of the church, to date. Mission and Service funds have helped countless people across Canada and around the world during famine and natural disaster. We have influenced legislation and government action in this country. Just think of how many years we provoked the federal government to apologize to the First Nations for the Residential Schools before Stephen Harper finally did in 2008. The other thing I wonder about is the difference between what we see as our legacy, and what others, outside of the church, see as our legacy. The ultimate questions is, what does God see as our legacy? Have we filled God's expectations, in whole or in part, or not at all?

And what about DUC? What do you think your legacy is? What does the wider community think your legacy is? What would God say is your legacy? These are questions you could talk about at coffee after the service, or on Wednesday morning.

In our baptisms the Spirit of God was with us. Throughout our lives the Spirit of God remains with us. No matter what 2025 holds for us, we can rest assured that God is with us. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, can we have anything other than great expectations?