

“Giving Up Expectations”

March 12, 2017

Giving It Up series – Second Sunday in Lent – Scouting Sunday

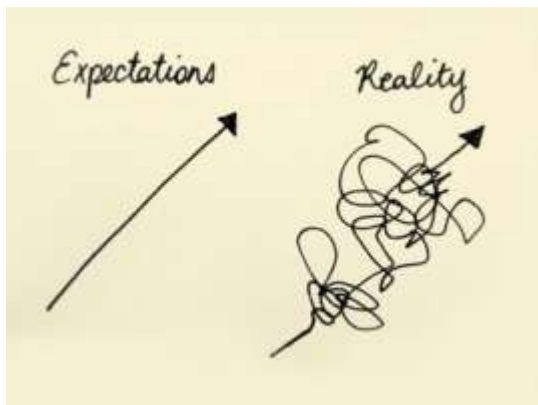
We started our conversation about “giving it up” with control. It’s not something we give up easily. Expectations are no different. Think about the expectations of the Super Bowl this year, especially after halftime. Did you watch – all the way through? The Patriots came back from a huge deficit to win in overtime against the Falcons.

How many of you watched the Oscars this year? All the way to the end? Even if you didn’t, you probably heard about the major mix-up for the Best Picture presentation. The wrong envelope was handed to presenters Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, and they proceeded to announce the wrong film as the Best Picture winner.

As the producer for *LaLa Land* was speaking, there was commotion on the stage and the realization that *Moonlight* was actually the winner. The chaos of the moment took away from the big award of the night, and everyone was stunned. Expectations that the accountants were keeping track were dashed, and there’s the big story for years to come.

Remember that question we asked last week: What would God choose that we give up for Lent - and take on instead? Control would be on the list to give up - allowing us to trust more deeply in God. Expectations might be a close second - especially our expectations of God.

Take a look at this image. Maybe you’ve seen it before:



We have expectations for how things will go, how life will unfold, how plans will play out. And our picture looks like a straight line going up.

But reality is usually a bit different or maybe quite a bit different. There are few more dips, turns, backtracks, stops, stalls, and unexpected changes from the expectations we hold tight to. For some, reality feels like a

scrambled mess that never meets their expectations.

And we work with expectations all the time. We come into the world with expectations based on gender and family history. For as much as we want to make sure that we allow for every child to learn and grow on their own terms, we have expectations early on.

We enter into every relationship with expectations. Our family has expectations about how we live together, who does what, and on and on. Whether it’s a friendship when we’re young (we expect our friend to be kind), or a dating relationship as we get

older (sometimes our expectations are based on what media says love should look like and feel like), or marriage (all of us enter into marriage with expectations about how it's going to be - and many times we find that our partner doesn't share those same expectations), or family expectations that continue to be a part of life as we age (caring for parents and caring for children and grandchildren), we have expectations.

Expectations aren't always a terrible thing, but we have to be clear about why we have them and if they're realistic. The bigger issue is that expectations can set us up for disappointment. The problem is that our expectations are usually focused on others - their behavior, their words, their decisions. And we usually don't pay a lot of attention to ourselves.

This is especially true for our spiritual lives. We have expectations for God. Many times we treat God like a vending machine asking for what we want and expecting to get it for a little bit of investment. We say, "Show me and I'll believe, God."

What we see in God's bigger story is the opposite. God says, "Believe, and I'll show you." Now that doesn't mean that God doesn't woo us along with grace from the very beginning, but Abram and Nicodemus both remind us that God isn't about meeting our expectations. God is always working to shatter the expectations we have and call us to deeper faith and trust. God is calling us to be open to what God is doing instead of staying stuck in our expectations.

As we started this season of Lent, we said that it isn't about chocolate or caffeine or anything else we might give up for a few weeks; this is a time for transformation that goes beyond 40 days. Can we give up expecting our lives to go a certain way and walk fully with God whose care is certain no matter what? Can we be transformed from settling into our own expectations and move to seeking God?

I wonder what Abram expecting and planning for his life. There was nothing particularly special about Abram. We don't why God chose him. His life isn't spectacular, but quite ordinary. He is simply called by God - and he responds.

It's worth taking a look at the first 11 chapters of Genesis to understand how amazing it is that God calls Abram. In a time when children were a must in order to keep the family line going, Abram doesn't have any. He's settled in one place, and God calls him to go to another. God chooses an unlikely person to be a pioneer - to become the Father of many nations - the foundation of a new life for humanity.

And even though Abram was called specifically, God's greater plan isn't only about him. God is clear that the promise made will bless all the people of the world. So when we talk about being called by God, it's never a self-serving thing. It's never just about us. God's greater plan is always in effect. God calls us so that a greater mission can be accomplished. For Abram, it was a blessing not for just in his own lifetime, but for future generations as well.

And what about Nicodemus? We know that he came to Jesus at night - wondering who Jesus was and what his role was. His expectations had been wrapped

up in the Law - in the rules he was called to follow. But his conversation with Jesus blows his expectations out of the water.

Jesus didn't come to meet our expectations of him. If he had, perhaps we wouldn't be here. He wasn't the Messiah they expected. A Messiah who suffers and dies for the sake of others isn't the picture of victory that comes from God - or at least not what they expected.

What they expected was success, power, and victory - not failure, what they perceived as weakness, or losing - dying on the cross. We know the end of the story. We know that the cross wasn't the end for Jesus. We know the tomb was empty. And yet we still struggle to give up the expectations that we carry about faith. Jesus' message still isn't comfortable or easy.

Maybe we still hold onto a false sense of security - that if we believe, then nothing bad will happen. But faith in Christ doesn't protect us from the reality of suffering. Faith in Jesus brings us hope and help in the midst of suffering.

And faith doesn't mean prosperity in terms of the world's standards. Believing in Jesus isn't a promise of more wealth or perfect health or a better job or relationships with no struggles. Faith in Jesus means that we will sacrifice for the sake of others. It means we'll face and make difficult decisions. Again, putting our faith in Jesus means that he's a part with us.

Jesus' words to Nicodemus show that love is his focus. Offering a life-giving relationship with God is what's he's about. It's not just following rules because that's not enough. It's about transformation that God brings when we seek new life. Being born again by the power of the Holy Spirit is real, and it means real change for us.

Again, expectations aren't always a bad thing. But our expectations around God can be problematic because we don't know the whole picture. Our understanding is limited. And if we're only looking at what's ahead, we might miss what's happening now. We might miss the work that God is doing and the ways that God is working to bring hope and life right now.

It would be easy to say that we should give up trying to meet everyone else's expectations. Maybe that would be well-received. But giving up expectations in light of the Scriptures for today has more to do with our expectations of Jesus - who he is and what he calls us to do as we seek to follow him.

And that's the operative word - follow. If I'm honest, I'd like to take the lead even in my relationship with God. I have a good idea of where God should lead me, and I'm happy to share it with God. What I'm not always willing to do is to give up my expectations of God and how God will move in my life, where God will call me, and how God will guide me to change.

Abram had a choice - to give up his expectations of God and follow. Will we walk with God instead of where we think we should go? Can this season be a time when we recommit ourselves to giving up expectations of God and letting God lead us? Can we

trust that God is calling us, equipping us with what we need, and transforming us in the process as we open our hearts more and more?

We face the unknown, new situations, and challenging circumstances that bring great joy and deep pain. God calls us - all with the purpose of building our relationship with God and blessing others.

May we give up those expectations of God that limit our ability to see God's power and presence, and may we embrace a life of faith where God's presence and power are real for us and part of the story of God's faithfulness that we tell.

May we let God lead us. Thanks be to God! AMEN.