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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA 94102, P26
1 Advent (Year C) 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 2 December 2018

Jeremiah 33: 14-16
Psalm 25: 1-9
1 Thess. 3: 9-13
Luke 21: 25-36

The Curse and Blessing of Our Expectations

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel before our God because of you..." (1 Thess. 3).

The thirty-nine year old man at the L'Enfant Metro subway station in Washington D.C. wore a Nationals baseball hat, a long-sleeved t-shirt and blue jeans.¹ He set up his violin, threw a few dollars into the case as seed money and at 7:51 a.m. on a cold winter day he began to play six pieces of classical music. Two things were remarkable about the next forty-three minutes.

First, was his seemingly perfect invisibility to nearly everyone. The musician remarked, "I'm surprised at the number of people who don't pay attention at all... Because you know what? I'm makin' a lot of noise!" Of the 1,097 people who passed only seven stopped for more than a minute. Twenty-seven gave a total of \$32.17. He was universally ignored by every demographic category, by men and women, workers and retired people, rich and poor, Asian, white and African-American – with the one exception of children. They tried to stop and listen but their parents always hurried them on.

People lined up at a nearby lottery machine and didn't even turn around. A deafening silence followed the end of each piece. Only once was there more than one person listening. Of the 1,097 people only one person recognized who he was and only one other person really stopped to listen.

Yes the second remarkable fact was that this was Joshua Bell who later that year won the Avery Fisher Prize as the best classical musician in America. He was playing some of the most powerful and difficult music ever written, on a Stradivarius violin built in 1713 which last sold for \$3.5 million. The night before he had filled Symphony Hall in Boston with people paying about \$100 per ticket.

The woman who recognized him said, "people were not stopping, and not even looking... I was thinking, *Omigosh, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?*"

Why were so few people able to receive this gift? Quite simply it was because they were not expecting it. To use Jesus' words, "their hearts were weighed down with... the worries of life" so that this moment of grace caught them "unexpectedly" (Lk. 21). Expectations matter. They constantly give form to the reality that we experience.

Have any of you ever watched the sardines that circle around the entryway to the Outer Bay exhibit at the Monterey Aquarium? All these shining fish go clockwise around the light blue top of the circular room together as a school. But one sardine swims above all the others and goes the opposite way. Being a Christian in Advent is a little like this. The Christian in December is the same kind of creature, doing the same kind of thing in the same kind of environment but differently.

Welcome to the season of Advent, a time of expectations, the church's new year observance when the world around us seems both strangely near to and oddly distant from our hopes. It is a time of imperfect harmony. The world waits for Christmas and expects to experience a little more generosity and kindness than we see at other times of the year. We as Christians participate in this too. We might even recognize some of our hymns played in shopping malls, but we also have much higher expectations. We expect the coming of the Holy One. We await the advent of the Christ. We hope that Jesus will be born in our hearts.

For every human being what we hope will happen is a vital part of our experience of what already is and who we are. Today I am wondering about the difference between expectations that deceive and damage us, and expectations that save us and show us the way into new life?

A few years ago I went to a dinner banquet for alumni from Bowles Hall, the last all male residence in the University of California system. Some men there had distinguished careers and one of us even has an airport named after him. But the group who had been in college with me seemed weighed down with the heaviness of failure. One friend had lost a fortune in the last year and was working at a job that he considered below his capabilities. Another just never felt like he lived up to his potential. I had known these gray-haired men when they were goofy freshmen and the sadness of these unfulfilled expectations moves me.

We talked about the 2008 movie *The Wrestler* as a kind of symbol for our experience. The wrestler played by Mickey Rourke is about a man in his forties who had been a celebrity professional wrestler back in the 1980's. Despite his now painfully ruined body he tries to make a comeback until a heart attack forces him to reevaluate his life. He reaches out to his estranged daughter, becomes close to a stripper with whom he has

fallen in love. But he cannot change. He cannot free himself from the expectations that have motivated his life for twenty-five years. He seems bent on his own destruction. His dreams are literally killing him.

Tragedy could be defined as suffering for who we are. The pain is magnified by the feeling that we cannot in any meaningful way change. But all of us can change our expectations, not only of our circumstances, but of other people and even of ourselves.

The nineteenth century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was famous for his pessimism. He believed in a fatalism that makes us victims of a malicious universe which controls our happiness through our circumstances in life. He wrote that, "Hope is the confusion of the desire for a thing with its probability."² What I mean by our expectations is not merely fantasizing that good things will happen to us. I'm not talking about the power of positive thinking.

I'm just saying that our well-being includes a subjective element. How we respond to what happens to us is a more important determinant of our happiness than our situation. When we regard ourselves as mere responders, when we think that quality of our life comes from our health, wealth, position, power, experience or good fortune, we tend to ignore the good things we already have. Expectations that lead us to disapprove of or condemn others diminish us right now. This way of experiencing other people will keep us from growing into our fullness as children of God.

You may be surprised to hear it, but despite his reputation John Calvin (1509-1564) has done more than almost any other person to influence my faith. He points out that one of the most deeply rooted human beliefs is our expectation that God will not take care of us. Most of our behavior having to do with the future rests on this assumption. Because of this, for Calvin faith is not merely believing that God exists, but believing that God loves and cares for us.³

We see this in Jesus' sacrifice for us. We understand its implications through the inspiration of the spirit. Becoming a Christian means beginning to live as people who know that they depend on God.

In so many ways people sit in judgment of God.⁴ They have their own idea of justice which is biased deeply in their own favor. They think that they could run the universe better than God does. They easily become angry with God about what happened to us in the past.

What is it that sets Christians apart – I believe it is the expectation that God will be good to us in the future. My college friends have a faith that rests in their individual accomplishments, in the respect that other people have for them and in the wealth that they believe will protect them. Everything in their life depends on what happens to be given to them on the outside.

But we are like that sardine swimming above it all. The world is baffled by Christian faith because it comes from the inside. This trust in God's goodness leads to a new experience of reality based on gratitude and love.

It is the expectation that the most powerful change we witness in our life will be the change in our own hearts as we turn our life to God.⁵ The experience of being God's children makes us more accepting of other people's faults. It changes our expectations of what God *should* be doing for us, so that we can receive the gifts that God is *actually* giving us.

One of my favorite lines in scripture comes from Paul's letter to his friends in distant Thessalonica. Scholars believe that these are the oldest words in the New Testament. He writes, "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel before our God because of you..." (1 Thess. 3:9). Paul loved those imperfect people in the way that we love each other here at Grace Cathedral. This attitude of joy and gratitude arises naturally out of our faithful expectations.

Literally one person in a thousand recognized Joshua Bell as he played the violin in the subway station. Only one other person really heard him, John Picarello, a short man with a baldish head who works as a supervisor for the postal service. He told a reporter what he heard. "It was a treat, just brilliant, an incredible way to start the day."

In this winter time when the hills surrounding us become green with new life, we too can choose to be like children and receive God's gift. How will you change your expectations this Advent? How will you let God change you?

¹ My summary cannot come close to doing justice to my excellent source. See Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast: Can One of the Nations Great Musicians Cut Through the Fog of a D.C. Rush Hour? Let's Find Out," *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2007. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721_pf.html

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, Tr. R.J. Hollingdale (NY: Penguin, 1970), 168.

³ Faith is knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the promise in Christ revealed by the Holy Spirit (Inst. 1:551).

⁴ One of the most vivid scenes in William Young's bestselling novel, *The Shack* happens when the main character, a man named Mack, encounters the spirit of God's wisdom in a cave. In the center of the room stands the judgment seat. Mack worries that he will not be able to stand this scrutiny over his sins. He is

then surprised to learn that instead this is the place where he sits to judge God. Sophia points out that judging requires us to believe that we are superior over the one being judged. William P. Young, *The Shack*, (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007) 159.

⁵ Calvin writes that the heart is more difficult to convert than the mind.