

Expecting God to Show Up – Ben Wayman

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Today I'd like to talk about religious experience. Specifically, I'd like to talk about experiencing **God** and whether we should expect to experience God in church.

There are all kinds of ways that people talk about experiencing God. My friends in California say they feel closer to God when surfing than they ever have at church. I have other friends who claim they feel especially close to God when they're loaded on drugs. And I have other friends still who say they feel God most when they get swept away in singing to God. None of these claims are new. People have been making them in various forms for centuries.

But today, I would like for us to consider experiencing God in church. There are some of us here today that do have this expectation: the expectation that in church at worship, God will show up. For others of us, though, we don't expect this of God, and maybe especially not in church. Or perhaps you may land somewhere in between these expectations – some days you expect God to show up, while other days you forget about that possibility altogether.

As we consider experiencing God in church, there are three things that I would like to explore. First, I want for us to inquire whether or not God, in the first place, is someone who can be experienced. Second, I want for us to look at baptism and consider whether baptism can be understood as an experience with God. And finally, I want for us to consider how the church invites us into ongoing friendship with God.

It seems right to me that we start by asking the question of whether or not God can be experienced in the first place. After all, it would be foolish of us to expect something of God that God himself never promised. This would be like expecting my two-year-old to potty train in a day. We might call this kind of expectation a 'faulty' expectation.

In our Gospel lesson today, we read that the people were **filled with expectation**. From the text, we find that they were expecting a messiah. Specifically, they were wondering if John the Baptist might be that Messiah. To this we might ask the question: was their expectation faulty?

Yes and no. On the one hand, they were right to expect a Messiah. As the people of God, God had promised them to expect a Messiah. On the other hand, as goes the story of the Gospels, we find that their expectations were still a bit faulty. The faulty bit came in through their expectation that the Messiah would be the next Military Marvel who would restore power to the Jews by force. This expectation, of course, was way off.

At the time of the crucifixion, the disciples probably thought their messianic expectations had been too high. But after the resurrection, the disciples came to find they had actually been too low. Instead of a military man, the Messiah turned out to be a God-man. Instead of starting a bloody war against the Romans, the Messiah himself became a bloody body for the Romans. Instead of conquering Rome, the Messiah conquered the world and in so doing, set free all people – Jews and Gentiles alike.

But to return to our question about whether or not we should expect to be able to experience God, we should answer: it all depends on who God is. If God is not a God who bends to our expectations, then on what authority can we expect to experience God?

The answer to this question, of whether we should expect to experience God, can be found in each of our scripture readings today, but I will at this point only mention our Old Testament lessons.

Isaiah wastes no time about whether we should expect to experience God. The prophet is clear: God will be with us.

Well, actually, God will be with Israel, his chosen people. But the way that we Christians have learned to read the Old Testament, from such teachers as the Apostle Paul, is that we can now consider ourselves God's chosen people. See if this changes how you read Scripture – to think that God's promise to Israel is a promise to you...

To Israel and to us, God says:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

Do not fear, for I am with you.

Just as God was with Israel in exile, God is with you in whatever binds you. More accurately though, God is with us. From Isaiah we learn that we experience God personally because God has promised to be with us communally. Often we like to start with ourselves and extend out from ourselves to the community; but with God, it actually happens the other way around. Through the faith community we can expect to experience God.

And the prophet isn't alone in his insistence that God can be experienced. The Psalmist agrees, and actually sounds a lot like my surfer friends who experience God in the power of the ocean.

Only there is one exception and this exception makes all the difference. There is a difference between knowing God through revelation and then seeing God in nature as opposed to seeing God in nature and presuming to know him. Let me give you an example.

Let's stick with the surfing motif. Surfing Rincon beach during an overhead winter swell can easily cause you to assume from your awe of the ocean that God must be even more awe-inspiring. But the problem is, it is difficult to tell by the surf at Rincon whether God is awesome or awful. Sheer power gives us little clues for identifying character. From my experience, given the unforgiving power of the ocean, especially Rincon in the winter, I would be led to think that God was awful.

According to surfer theology, God can be experienced. In fact, God can be experienced so acutely that God has the power to drown you. And like I said earlier, Christian theology mostly agrees with the surfer theologian, but with one huge exception. Yes, God can be experienced. Yes, God has the power to drown you. And the exception: God will **not** drown you. In fact, as the prophet just told us: God has promised to be with us and will not allow the waters to overwhelm us. Knowing God through revelation makes all the difference.

So from our Old Testament readings today, we find that God can be experienced. From Isaiah we learn that God is with us and that God loves us. From the Psalmist we learn that God can be experienced in nature. God's voice, the Psalmist tells us, is over the waters, it thunders, it breaks trees, shakes the wilderness and strips bare the forest. God's voice is every bit as powerful as nature. But as Christians, we know God in Christ. And from Christ, we know that God's power is directed towards redemption and not destruction. So these are two examples that give us good reason to expect that God can be experienced.

If we take it that God can indeed be experienced, that God is personally involved with us and in our lives, then the New Testament will give us all the more reason to believe this. As Joe Noble reminded us last week in his sermon on John's Gospel: God became flesh and lived among us.

The logic of our faith affirms not only that God can be experienced, but that God desires to be experienced. Which leads us to an important problem, which I will frame in the form of a question. If God **desires** to be experienced, then why do we experience him so little?

After all, if it is true that God desires to be experienced, it is actually surprising that we come to church with little expectation that God will show up. Today I would like to suggest that the reason why we do not expect to experience God in church is because our expectations are faulty. Let me give you an example.

Many of us think we know what we are talking about when we talk about experiencing God. We might expect an indescribable feeling – something we know from the tips of our toes, or it may be a rush we feel through your whole body, or maybe it's just a strange warming of the heart.

Regardless of how it is that we think of experiencing God, many of us have an experience barometer that measures the quantity and quality of the mystery we are experiencing.

I would like to suggest that our barometers are not able to detect God all the time. To say this in another way: we experience God even when we're not aware of it.

Baptism is the perfect example. The church has long claimed that baptism is an essential practice for the Christian life. In fact, it's so essential, that we call it a sacrament. We call things sacramental when we want to emphasize that God is particularly active in a specific act. So baptism is a sacrament because we believe that in baptism, God is doing something God is not doing at other times.

Specifically, we believe that in baptism, God is claiming us and mysteriously re-making us as a part of his own body. We call Christ's body the church, so in baptism, we become not only part of a community that extends from St. Paul's to St. Peter's, but we become part of Christ's own body. The theology is a bit uncomfortable for us, which I alluded to earlier: God encounters us personally, but he does so through the community. First community, then you. Not the other way around.

Christ's baptism, which we read about in Luke's Gospel today, provides the model for our own baptisms. In Christ's baptism, God the Father personally embraces Christ in the Holy Spirit – as a community. As Luke tells it, God's words to Christ are personal, presumably only for him to hear: "**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism sounds a lot like the voice we heard today from Isaiah: "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (43:1). Baptism marks the sacred moment when God embraces us personally through the church.

Of course, Christ's baptism is unique from ours in that in his baptism, his relationship with God is not changed. But when God embraces us in baptism, we are fundamentally changed. Whether we hear it or not, we are addressed by God personally, we are called God's beloved, and we become children of God. To be clear: our awareness of God's action does not determine whether or not God is actually acting.

Baptism, I think, can help us quite a bit with reevaluating our expectations of experiencing God. Too often we expect God to register on our God-radar in a certain kind of way. But what I am suggesting today is that we have good reason to believe that we experience God in ways we often cannot feel. So our expectations are partly faulty, just like the disciples' expectations of the messiah. We are right to expect to experience God, but our expectations are a bit off when it comes to what that experience will look like (or feel like).

Like baptism, Eucharist is another example of experiencing God in a way that often does not register as an experience with God. If our life in the church is anything, it is a journey in friendship with God. Baptism marks the beginning of this journey, while Communion is our

ongoing nourishment in our journey. Communion is perhaps the most significant way that the church invites us into regular encounter with God.

In fact, I think it would be right to start thinking about Baptism and Eucharist as the **norms** for religious experience. Sure, God sometimes knocks you off your horse and strikes you blind until you track down Ananias, but this is not the usual way that God encounters us. Rather, as we live among the people that God is setting free, the church, we regularly experience God, even though we are often unaware of it.

If you want to experience God ...If you want to know that God is embracing you in a personal way, come and receive Christ at the table. You can expect God to show up here because God has promised to be present to us in this way. In Communion, you might even hear or feel God in some recognizable way. But if you don't that does not mean that you are not experiencing God. It only means that you aren't aware of it. It is quite possible that the most common ways that we experience God cannot be felt.

This brings us to our Acts passage. In our reading today, it is not clear that when Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans, who then received the Holy Spirit, that anyone – Peter or John or the Samaritans felt or heard anything. While the book of Acts does give us some accounts of the Spirit's presence that would be hard not to recognize, there is no rushing wind in today's encounter. Rather, all that we are told is that the Samaritans "received the Holy Spirit" (8:17). For all we know no one heard or felt anything.

What is more significant about this passage than whether or not the Samaritans felt they were experiencing God is that God was present and with them. Whether or not the Samaritans felt anything or Peter and John heard anything, we know that the Samaritans "received the Holy Spirit." Perhaps it was the case that Peter and John and the Samaritans had to take it on faith that God had shown up and that they had experienced him. Similarly, we take it on faith that God shows up in church, whether we feel it or not.

One of my favorite prayers that we pray every morning at Morning Prayer is a prayer by St. John Chrysostom. One of the lines of his prayer reads: "you have **promised** through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you **will** be in the midst of them." It's a promise to experience God. We can bank on God showing up in church not because we feel it experientially, but because God has promised to be present.

Every Sunday at St. Paul's we should expect to experience God. We should expect to experience God because God has promised to be here, among us who have gathered in his name and in the elements that God has promised to embody. We are not expecting too much to want to experience God, but our expectations are faulty when we expect to experience God on our own terms, in a way that we have decided that God should be experienced. Rather, we should take God at God's word: to meet him in each other as we pass the peace, and to meet him at the table.

To be sure, Church is not the only place that God can be experienced. But just like Christ's baptism is the model for our baptism, the Church is the model for our experience of God. In the Church we encounter the God that can also be encountered in the world. But we know who God is by knowing him in Christ, who we meet at the font and the table, and who we proclaim from the pulpit.

My hope today is that we will be a people filled with expectation. I hope that we will expect God to make good on his promises: to show up, to be with us – in whatever way that might be. My hope is that we will be open to the possibility that even now God is showing up, even if we aren't feeling anything. And finally, my hope is that as we journey together as friends of God, as we expect God to show up at church, our awareness of God will become so acute that we can't help but be aware of God's presence everywhere.