

People of Expectation

Year C, Proper 14, Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Life is all about expectations. Whether you're a Christian or not, expectations shape our lives. The expectations we have of school, sports, work, family, friends, church, government and more, all inform how we arrange our lives. We talk about meeting expectations, exceeding expectations, and managing expectations. Communicating expectations is healthy practice for couples, companies, and countries. Sometimes expectations are unrealistic and need to be adjusted. And sometimes expectations fail to bring out the best in us or others. Expectations shape how we live and engage the world.

While all people are shaped by expectations, Christians are people of expectation in a peculiar way because our deepest held expectations are set by God rather than the world. Our expectations are shaped by the kind of God we serve, and our God makes surprising promises. It's fitting then that the constellation of our expectations as people of God are different from the ones we would drum up on our own.

Today we'll consider what it means for us to be a people of holy expectation. First, we'll explore God's surprising promises and how this makes us a people of holy expectation. Then I'll clarify how holy expectation is different from wishful or deluded thinking. And finally, I'll propose three virtues or habits that help us embrace lives of holy expectation.

Let's start with Abram. Abram was a man of holy expectation and when we meet him today, he's been through a lot. Our text begins, "After these things," which reminds us of all that's transpired since God called Abram to leave his country and father's house. Abram has survived a famine and a trip to Egypt where his wife was taken into Pharaoh's house; he's endured separation from his nephew Lot who later became a prisoner of war; he's rescued Lot in a covert mission at night against the prevailing army; and he's been blessed by the great priest Melchizedek of Jerusalem. One takeaway from these misadventures of Abram is that every "thing" that has happened to him is a result of Abram's holy expectations that set him on a journey with the God who makes promises.

In today's reading from Genesis, we encounter Abram circling back to God's initial promises, asking if he needs to adjust his expectations. According to New Testament scholar Ronald Hendel, "The promises to Abram include blessing, a great name (fame, renown), numerous descendants who will become a great nation, and land" (HCSB 21). The point of God's promises is that all nations would be blessed through Abram. These are promises to bless the world.

Our reading from Genesis today is short. It only covers the promise where God told Abram to expect a child, even in his old age and even though his aging wife Sarai had not been able to have children. This promise is enough, though, for us to see how God's promise made Abram a person of holy expectation.

Abram's expectation is grounded in his trust in God. Abram believed God's promise that he would have a child even in his old age, even though God had not yet fulfilled this promise. Whether the mother will be Sarai is left open here, which sets the stage for the conflict with Hagar, but the point I want to make is that Abram's expectation would not make sense without God. Without God, such an expectation would be wishful thinking at best or delusional at worst. Unsure at first, Abram is convinced by God that he will in fact have a child, and his conviction is founded on his belief that God will make good on God's promises. That's holy expectation.

So what's the difference between holy expectation and wishful or deluded thinking? Revelation. For Abram, it came in the form of a vision, which is a particular kind of experience. But revelation also comes in the form of Scripture, or reason, or tradition. The difference between holy expectations and deluded thinking is that holy expectations are rooted in revelation. And revelation is confirmed by community discernment.

Take the Bible, for example. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible was not "revealed" to the emperor Constantine and codified at the council of Nicaea. Nor was the Bible deposited into the hands of Jesus's disciples or even that of Martin Luther. The Bible was a community project whereby God revealed God's self to Israel and then the church. The writings that came from such revelation, especially the ones that would make up the New Testament, were by no means determined as revelation on the spot, but rather were acknowledged and confirmed as revelation over the course of nearly three hundred years. It was the Christian community's patient discernment that confirmed which writings were indeed revelation, and much of this discernment came from an increasing sense gained through using the writings in worship.

Identifying revelation often requires communal discernment. Whether we're talking about the revelation of Scripture or Abram's revelation in a vision, we need the people of God to discern revelation. Abram had Sarai and Lot that confirmed God's calling on his life. We all would do well to share God's promises with each other, to discern together whether we are rightly identifying a promise of God. So the difference between holy expectation and deluded thinking has everything to do with the Christian community and our ability to discern together God's revealed will for our lives.

So what kind of virtues or habits do we need to be people of holy expectation? In addition to being people who can discern revelation from deception, I'd like to propose we take our cues from Hebrews and Luke's Gospel and so become people of hopeful speech, material indifference, and people ready for adventure.

From Hebrews, we learn that being people of holy expectation means developing a new way of speaking rooted in hope. The author makes the striking observation that people of hope may die before seeing God's promises come to fruition. In verse 13 he writes, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises." In this observation, the author is shaping his audience and us to become people who see God's promises as far bigger than any one of us. So big, in fact, that you and I might never see them fulfilled.

The observation that we may never see God's promises fulfilled in our life gives way to our first virtue for living in holy expectation: hopeful speech. For the author of Hebrews, Christian speech

is strange. He explains that all those people who “died in faith without having received the promises...confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on earth, for people who speak this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland” (11:13-14). To identify as a stranger and foreigner is to believe that God’s “future is bigger than [our] past” (Sam Wells). Such hopeful speech is not haunted by the past or trapped in the present. To speak with hope means that we “desire a better country” than where we might happen to find ourselves, and we speak longingly of the heavenly city God has prepared for us.

Such hopeful speech reframes how Christians might talk about any number of issues, but most fundamentally, it calls into question national and state boundaries and challenges our allegiance to earthly countries. Our hope, the Psalmist reminds us today, is in God’s steadfast love and not kings, armies, or weapons of war. Whether the promise is fulfilled in our lifetime or not, Christians are people who hope in the heavenly city, which is what Jesus has in mind when he talks about the kingdom of God.

If hopeful speech is Hebrews’ contributing virtue to being people of holy expectation, then material indifference and becoming people ready for action are Jesus’s contributions we find in Luke’s Gospel. When Jesus encourages the disciples to sell their possessions and give to the poor, he does so after warning them earlier in chapter 12 to “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (12:15). Here Jesus exposes the ways in which greed manifests variously, and particularly through possessions. Being materially indifferent means becoming people who hold our things lightly. If we hold our things lightly, we can sell them, lend them, and give them away. Such generosity not only cares for others and facilitates friendship, it also ensures our own freedom. By being indifferent to our material possessions, we free ourselves from their grip.

Jesus helps us understand that “where your treasure is, there your hearts will be also” (12:34). By becoming people of material indifference we free our hearts and minds for true treasure. The Greek word for heart used here by Jesus is *kardia* (καρδία), which can also be defined as “mind.” Greek scholar Bill Mounce explains, “The heart was thought to be the seat of the inner self (composed of life, soul, mind, and spirit). *Heart* is similar in meaning to *soul*, but often the *heart* has a focus on thinking and understanding” (<https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/kardia>). What Jesus helps us see is that people of holy expectation know how to assess treasure rightly. If our hearts are constrained by material possessions, we lose the ability to align our lives with God’s promises. By setting our minds on money rather than “unfailing treasure in heaven,” we settle our expectations on things that are temporary and wear out.

People of holy expectation know how to identify true treasure because we hope in the kingdom of God rather than the currency of countries. And for Jesus, the virtue of identifying true treasure is closely aligned with becoming people who are ready for adventure, or as Jesus puts it, *dressed for action*.

Since its earliest days, the church has committed itself to being alert, watchful, and ready for Jesus’s return. Our being a people of holy expectation is rooted in Jesus’s promise to come again, which we affirm every time we say the Apostles Creed. Our being prepared for Jesus can become

for Christians a habit of being whereby we are always on the lookout for God, not only in Jesus's return, but also in the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in our life together. The idea here is not that we would get wrapped up in predicting the end times but rather that we would be a people who are ready to act, who expect God to speak to us and reveal God's will for us in each unfolding moment. This is the great joy of being people of holy expectation: we expect God to continue speaking to us, inviting us to a new adventure.

I wonder if you have a specific holy expectation. Maybe you have a holy expectation that God will heal a loved one or mend a broken relationship. Or maybe you have a holy expectation rooted in a promise God has made to you. Today we gather as a community that celebrates and supports one another in our holy expectations. We believe God makes surprising promises and can be trusted to follow through on them.

Being a people of holy expectation does not mean limiting our collective expectation to Jesus's return, but allowing that hope to inform every aspect of our lives in the conviction that God is at work among us even now and invites us to join in. When we discern God's revelation, speak hopefully, hold our stuff lightly, and prepare ourselves for action, we become the kind of people capable of following Jesus.

Following Jesus ensures a life full of surprise, as the stories of Abram, the disciples, and church history all show us. But the great joy of it all is that our expectations might be recalibrated from the dullness of human limitation to the awesomeness of God, who makes surprising promises to people like you and me and follows through on them.