



Give It Up: Expectations

Genesis 12:1-4; John 3:1-17
A Lenten-Easter Sermon Series

Rev. Michael D. Halley
Suffolk Christian Church

March 1, 2015
Suffolk, Virginia

The Second Sunday in Lent¹

Genesis 12:1-4

New International Version (NIV)

The Lord had said to Abram², “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot³ went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran⁴.

John 3:1-17

New International Version (NIV)

Now there was a Pharisee⁵, a man named Nicodemus (nick-uh-DEE-muss)⁶,
who was a member of the Jewish ruling council⁷. He came to Jesus at night

and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness⁸, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Word of the Lord:
Thanks be to God!

As we continue our journey through the days of the season of Lent, leading us to the great celebration of Easter, we are in days of preparation. During these six weeks of Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, we Christians are called to prayer, to repentance, to do charitable works, to give generously of time, talent, and treasure, and to acts of self-denial.

As you know, often Christians observe Lent by giving up something for these forty days. In that spirit of “giving up”, I have some suggestions about what we might consider giving up. Last week we looked at giving up control, and today I am suggesting that we give up expectations.

One of the great mysteries of life with which we all struggle is that we don't know and can't know what's going to happen next. That's exactly where we find Abram (his name means “Noble Father”) in our Scripture lesson for today. Whatever expectations Abram may have had about the call of God upon his life and what the future would be for him, he really couldn't be sure it would turn out the way he expected.

Surely Abram had expectations about this new adventure in his life. But I suspect that very few of his initial expectations were fulfilled exactly how he envisioned them. I would think that all he knew for sure was that God was calling him and that he wanted to obey God. And as events unfolded and as he and his family made that journey to the land God had promised, he had to go on faith and not on his own expectations.

No doubt Abram, like us, wanted to have control over his circumstances. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have a big case of anxiety as well. How could he be faithful to his calling from God and have contentment and joy at the same time? Maybe he could have or should have listened to the counsel of Paul McCartney.

In 1970, Paul McCartney composed his hit song “Let It Be”, which became one of the most popular of all the Beatles' songs. It was during a

rather tense period in his professional life ~ this was just before he left the Beatles ~ and he says he composed the song after he had a dream about his mother, who had died when Paul was fourteen. It was a very comforting dream, and his mother gave him this piece of advice: “It will be all right, just let it be.”⁹

Think about that for a moment. You have all these expectations about the future. You want things to happen a certain way, even though you know they probably won't. Nervousness and anxiety are everywhere you turn. Maybe we should let things unfold naturally and simply “let it be”.

Nicodemus was in a similar predicament. He was a very important and prominent man. He is called a “ruler of the Jews”, and he was an authority on the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. But one night, he sought out Jesus, an itinerant, unschooled teacher, so he could better understand what Jesus was teaching.

However, Nicodemus had a hard time understanding Jesus because of his expectations. This concept of the new birth puzzled him, since his religious teachings were based on an entirely different concept. His expectations of how things “should” turn out got in the way of his understanding what God was saying to him.

Dr. James Dobson wrote an insightful essay¹⁰ about Dr. Stephen Hawking, the renowned astrophysicist and arguably the most brilliant person on earth. Dr. Hawking, you will recall, suffers from Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS, and can do little more than sit in his wheelchair and think.

Dr. Hawking said that before he became ill, he had very little interest in life. He was bored and felt that life was a “pointless existence”. He was drinking too much and going nowhere. When he was diagnosed with ALS he was not expected to live more than two years. Whatever expectations he may have had for his life would be completely shattered, would you not think?

Not so. Dr. Hawking says now that the ultimate effect of his diagnosis was an extremely positive thing, that he has never been more happy with his life. How can that be?

He explains it like this: “When one’s expectations are reduced to zero, one really appreciates everything that one does have.” Dr. Dobson put it another way:

Contentment in life is determined in part by what a person anticipates from it. To a man like [Dr.] Hawking, who thought he would soon die quickly, everything takes on meaning ~ a sunrise or a walk in a park or the laughter of children. Suddenly, each small pleasure becomes precious. By contrast, those who believe life owes them a free ride are often discontent with its finest gifts.

Let go. Let it be. Let God be in charge.

Expectations are not bad. But they are dangerous. Our expectations can get out of control, and then we start believing that “life should please us, that life should be comfortable”.¹¹ And most of us probably honestly believe that if we are not comfortable we can’t be happy. This is not a good expectation, so let’s give it up.

As I pondered these thoughts on expectations, I kept thinking about last week’s sermon on control. The two concepts seem to be related. If we aren’t careful we will try to control things in order to fulfill our expectations, another reason to give them both up! Let it be. Let it happen. God is in control and we are not.

Plan, yes. Be prepared, yes. Have a contingency plan, yes. Keep your options open, yes. But let it be and let God be in control.

When Nicodemus quizzed Jesus on his teachings, he had to let his former expectations about religious faith go. Jesus introduced him to something new, the new birth, or being born again.

“The Son of Man must be lifted up,” Jesus told him, so “that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” And then Jesus gave Nicodemus and me and you the ultimate definition of the Gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Like Abram on his journey to a new life, we, too, must take that first step in faith. Drop your expectations and take what it is that God hands to you as what he wants you to have and learn from life.

In a moment, after our Communion hymn, we will gather around this table to be fed bread and wine, symbolizing the body and blood of our Lord Jesus, who loved us enough to give his life for us. This table is open to all and we invite you to commune together as the Body of Christ.

Today’s liturgy for the Service of Communion is taken from the Manual of The Southern Convention of the Congregational Christian Churches, published in 1948. This was the personal copy of our sixth pastor, Dr. John G. Truitt.¹²

You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament¹³ to your comfort.

Let us hear the words of the institution of the sacrament, reading from Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 26, verses 26 to 29 (ERV¹⁴):

While they were eating, Jesus took some bread and thanked God for it. He broke off some pieces, gave them to his followers and said, “Take this bread and eat it. It is my body.”

Then he took a cup of wine, thanked God for it, and gave it to them.

He said, “Each one of you drink some of it. This wine is my blood, which will be poured out to forgive the sins of many and begin the new agreement from God to his people. I want you to know, I will not drink this wine again until that day when we are together in my Father’s kingdom and the wine is new. Then I will drink it again with you.”

The bread: the body of Christ.

The cup: the blood of Christ.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, of your great mercy you sent Jesus your only-begotten Son to live among us, to suffer the punishment for our sins, and give his life that we might have eternal life with you. We remember this great act of salvation as we partake the bread and the wine, symbols of the body and the blood of our Saviour. May your Holy Spirit seal these things to our heart, as we pray this in deep gratitude for your love, Amen.

~~~~~

O Jesus, your body of life is broken for us.  
Thank you for your amazing grace.  
The body of Christ given for you.

O Jesus, your love and sacrifice  
is poured out for us.  
Thank you for your amazing grace.  
The blood of Christ shed for you.

~~~~~

Let us pray¹⁵:

Jesus, no words can express our gratitude and amazement that you should die for us. How amazing is it that each of our lives is so valuable to you

that you would lay yours down to reach us. May the bread and wine remain with us as we seek to take your message of love and grace into the world.

Amen.

All Scripture references are from New International Version®, NIV®, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®, unless otherwise indicated.

+==+==+==+==+==+==+

<p><i>Sunday Sermons from Suffolk Christian Church</i> are intended for the private devotional use of members and friends of the church. Please do not print or publish. Thank you. Suggestions for sermon topics are always welcome!</p>
--

-
1. “Lent”, from the Old English word for “Spring”, is a solemn religious observance in the liturgical calendar of many Christian denominations. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (which was February 18 of this year) and covers a period of approximately six weeks before Easter Sunday. Many Christians fast from eating certain foods, give up some pleasure, do charitable deeds, and give to worthy causes to mark the days of Lent.
 2. Genesis 17:4-6 says, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer will your name be Abram. Instead, your name will be Abraham, because I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you extremely fruitful. I will make nations of you, and kings will descend from you.” “Here, God changes the name of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. So Abram (Noble Father) becomes Abraham (Father of Many) and Sarai, (Princess) becomes Sarah (Mother of Nations).” See the article, “What is the significance of changing the names of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah?”, at [www.http://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/15116/](http://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/15116/).
 3. Lot was the son of Haran and nephew of Abraham (Genesis 11:27).

4. "Haran" was "an important city of northern Mesopotamia located on the Balik River". See "Haran", by David M. Fleming, in Holman Bible Dictionary, Edited by Trent C. Butler, www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/view.cgi?n=2541, c. 1991.
5. "Judaism in New Testament times was diverse. We read of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. One man is called a Zealot. From other sources we learn of the Essenes. . . . The Pharisees constituted the most important group. They appear in the Gospels as the opponents of Jesus. . . . They were the most numerous of the groups, although Josephus [a Roman historian who lived at that time] stated that they numbered only about six thousand. They controlled the synagogues and exercised great control over the general population." "Pharisee" means "separated ones". See "Jewish Parties in the New Testament", by Clayton Harrop, in Holman Bible Dictionary, cited above.
6. "John identifies Nicodemus as a Pharisee, 'a ruler of the Jews' (John 3:1), that is, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and as 'a teacher of Israel' (John 3:10), that is, an authority on the interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures." From "Nicodemus", Holman Bible Dictionary, cited above.
7. Or, Sanhedrin (sann-HEE-drinn). It was "the highest Jewish council in the first century. The council had 71 members and was presided over by the high priest. The Sanhedrin included both of the main Jewish parties among its membership. From "Sanhedrin", by Robert J. Dean, Holman Bible Dictionary, cited above.
8. Jesus is referring to Numbers 21:8: The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."
9. See "Let It Be (song)", www.en.wikipedia.org.
10. The essay is entitled "No Room for Self-Pity", told in Stories of the Heart and Home (published in 2000 by W Publishing Group), a compilation of various stories in earlier published works. I could not determine the page number from the excerpt I read online.
11. Quoted from Beyond Happiness: The Zen Way to True Contentment, by Ezra Bayda, published by Shambhala Publications, 2011.
12. The Rev. John Galloway Truitt, D.D. (1891-1978), was pastor of our church from 1933 to 1949.
13. A sacrament is a Christian ceremony which we recognize as of particular importance and significance.
14. Easy-to-Read Version (ERV), copyright © 2006 by World Bible Translation Center
15. A post-communion prayer from www.lords-prayer-words.com.

