

EXPECTATIONS

A Homily Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
(Unitarian Universalist)
Sunday, Dec. 11, 2011
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Reading

from "East Coker," in *The Four Quartets*

T.S. Eliot

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Resp. Reading 619

Magnificat

W. Frederick Wooden

My soul magnifies God/ We are enlarged.

And my soul breaks out, rejoicing in the face of freedom.

That God (something now within, yet not mine) has glanced at this daughter of hope.

And behold, henceforth, time will know and regard me.

For that great mystery is a beam/ Drawn through this lens,

Comforting me and all people./ The shadows now dispersed.

There is strength here/ Like the sinew of a mother's arm.

It shatters the brittle pride of wealth;

It levels the clay-foot thrones of tyrants;

It upholds the forgotten, the scarred.

Hunger, both body and soul, will be filled.

Riches will no more be rewarded.

The holy one cleaves to those who keep faith; it will endure in those who serve mercy.

And the promise made to legend ancestors will be kept.

Reading

from a letter to Cecil Dawkins

Flannery O'Connor

To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life; and this is a softness
which ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures.

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Two cartoons in the latest issue of *The New Yorker* seem relevant to our theme, “expectations.”

One, titled “The Faith-Based Family,” has a family of four sitting together, each lost in thought. The dad is thinking, “One day, cars will run on tap water!” His wife is thinking, “One day, there will be chocolate cake that tastes great and has zero calories!” The teenage daughter: “One day, school won’t exist – you’ll just swallow a pill, and voila!” And her younger brother, “One day, monkeys will rule the universe!” Now I’m for faith, but not for forms I consider “fantastic”!

The second cartoon shows two parents with an infant in arms, standing in a nursery simply chock-a-block with toys, stuffed animals, gizmos and gee-gaws, as one says to the other, “I just worry that we won’t be able to provide the same level of crap that our parents gave to us.”

Thirty-six years ago yesterday, on our first child’s first birthday, Gwen and I moved into the first house we bought together. We told her, “Please, don’t expect anything so quite big next year.” That very, very, very fine house, in a nice neighborhood, just around the corner from mayor’s, cost us all of thirty-six thousand, as I recall. This was in Knoxville, TN. Three times my annual compensation then. The last house we bought, here in Needham, cost about eight times my pay. Expect to have to help my successor find housing here!

My current successor as UUA President, Peter Morales, wrote in his blog-post this week saying, “I have a practice, perhaps it even qualifies as a spiritual practice, that helps [to] put everything in perspective. On my computer I’ve made the “[Astronomy Picture of the Day](#)” my home page. It sounds silly, I know. This is a website that features stunning photographs, many from the Hubble . . . and other major telescopes. The photo changes [each] day. [Each is] . . . beautiful and often breathtaking. For me, [these photos help to] put my daily worries into cosmic perspective.

. . I am especially fond of the [ultra deep field image of galaxies](#) that show us the early universe. Also, as the pace and the stress heightens in the weeks ahead, you may want to take advantage of the [Hubble Space Telescope Advent Calendar](#).”

“ So what is *your* practice that centers you and helps you put things into perspective? Prayer? A quiet cup of tea? Meditation? Writing in a journal? Walking in a special place?” Whatever it is, Peter urges each of us to have a practice to maintain perspective -- to manage our expectations.

High expectations can be a good thing – for oneself, for one’s children, for the world we live in. Whenever I listen to music of the quality we’re enjoying this morning, I’m aware of all the high standards and expectations required to draw forth such excellence. This week I also answered an online survey from the UUA. The single question that made me ponder the most was this one: “Does your congregation have high expectations of its members?”

On many questions, I was able to give us a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. But on that one, I gave us a 3. As your minister for nearly 10 years now, I ‘m aware of how often we *don’t* expect very much -- like showing up, commitment, or generosity with time or treasure.. We fear scaring people off, I’m afraid, of asking too much of people whose hurts or limitations aren’t visible. But of course, we then run a risk of frustrating and burning out those who are most highly committed.

Writer Flannery O’Connor, in a letter to her friend Cecil Dawkins, admonished him for using the lack of perfection in the church as an excuse for just staying aloof and critical. She told him he had an inadequate understanding of human fallibility, of sin. “You don’t serve God by saying: the Church is ineffective, I’ll have none of it,” she wrote. “Your pain at its lack of effectiveness is a sign of your [yearning for] God [--for perfection.] We [can] help overcome this lack of effectiveness . . . [but] to have the Church be what you want it to be would require the continuous miraculous meddling of God in human affairs, whereas it is our dignity that we are allowed more or less to get on with those graces that come through faith . . and which work through our human nature. We can’t understand this but we can’t reject it without rejecting life.” “To expect too much,” she ended, “is to have a sentimental view of life; and this is a softness which ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures.” “Charity is hard – and endures.”

Some teachers of compassion say, “Strive to expect nothing. Just be here now.” Well, easier said than done! To *ex-pect* is to look outward. And I’m not in favor of giving that up. As a T-shirt says, “Only YOU can prevent narcissism!” When disappointed with a spouse or friend, I suggest, try looking in the mirror, and then repeating to oneself, “You know: you’re no prize either!”

But you’ve heard that before. What I may never have said here before quite so clearly is that the tendency of many of us rational, well-informed, progressive thinkers to feel that mindless, self-centered, short-sighted, fear-mongering idiots are now in the saddle— a general thesis that I would not for a moment want to contradict – that this justifies from us a pervasive pessimism. None of us has a high enough global or cosmic perspective to justify giving up in despair.

Sure, as the old cartoon character Pogo once read in the newspaper, sitting in a swamp boat in the Okefenokee, “Sun Will Burn Out in Ten Billion Years, Ending All Life!” To which he said, “Woe is me! Ah is too young to die!” And to which his companion, Churchy La Femme replied, “Ah! Sit down and shut up! You’re lucky to be here at all.” As indeed we are.

This is a season when many people seem to be trying to manage the expectations of other people. Department store Santas have been trained to spot children of the unemployed and then reduce their expectations. Political spin-meisters saying, “Well, don’t expect our candidate to win Iowa, New Hampshire, or South Carolina. But if we come in fourth . . .” And now I’m here to tell you, the only person who can and should manage your expectations is you; and only for yourself.

But what you expect of the world you live in does matter – to your spirit. Yesterday was also Human Rights Day -- 63 years since the UN first adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There are plenty of people who’ll tell you that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket – to fan your fears, get your vote, your attention, or pretend to be the messiah you’ve wanted.

But I agree with a blog-post by my predecessor at the UUA, Bill Schulz, who then led Amnesty International USA, and now leads of our own human rights arm, the UU Service Committee – 2011 was a year of real progress on human rights. Thanks to uprisings like the Arab Spring; and

groups like the Arab League turning against abuses in countries like Syria, an old moral norm, “You who rule shall not with impunity kill your own people,” now has greater global credence.

Here in the US, people are awakening to the pernicious effects of growing economic inequality. This is not to deny rape and electoral fraud in Congo; suppression of dissent in Russia, China, Iran, and elsewhere. But it is to note, as Harvard psychologist Dr. Stephen Pinker recently wrote, that *The Better Angels of Our Nature* – recognizing our interdependence with one another and with Nature – *are* reducing violence, despite our technologies to increase it.

Unsteadily we lope toward Bethlehem, there to sing, “Hosanna in the highest! Peace on earth to those of good will.” God knows, not all humans yet embrace good will. So don’t expect justice and peace on earth tomorrow, as if such gifts could be provided from on high, without any effort on our human part. But also avoid expecting only gloom and doom. That all too soon becomes a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The message of Advent is actually quite simple: that the Holy, Grace, the Transforming Power, is most likely to appear where it is *least* expected: in the belly of a poor, unmarried woman in an obscure province of an exploitative empire; or in you out there, or in complacent me.

Newborns, like the stars, help us regain perspective. As Unitarian writer Kurt Vonnegut puts it, in his novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater!*, “Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.”

It isn’t easy, of course. We become unkind when we expect perfection and become impatient. This I know from experience. But in these weeks of expectation, let us find a practice, a discipline, to teach us to regain perspective, open ourselves to grace, growth, maybe even joy, and expect ourselves – no one else – to become better in anticipation of what it might mean for the mysterious Love that made the sun and stars to appear here on earth, in us, and among us, spreading Light, even in the very darkest of our days. So may it be. Amen.