
Lent: Give up your expectations
Martin Grove United Church
March 24, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

This Lent we are working around the dual themes of temptation and giving up something for Lent. And by giving something up for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to your life, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow you to find new life. Important things that may help you connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that many help you understand the term “resurrection” in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our life would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - wanting a bass guitar to compliment our guitar group. But in truth for most of us, what will make our lives better is usually NOT having more. For most of us the thing that would make our lives better is to have less. But less of the right things. You know, less of the things that weigh you down, like negativity, resentment, anger, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority. Giving up something for Lent actually makes good sense.

That was the opening paragraph from last week’s sermon, but I really felt it was worth repeating. Mind you, I’m probably wasting my breath here. Last week we discussed giving up our need for control for Lent. I’m sure you all took that message to heart and have already radically reformed your lives and found deep inner spiritual peace, right? I’m sure that this week, there is nothing left to discuss.

Or perhaps dealing - at least in part - with issues of control, you have simply been brought face-to-face with another barrier, a new wall. Perhaps this week there is a call to give up something else for Lent. Perhaps we need to give up something else to help us in our call to give up control?

I propose that this week - we need to give up expectations. If you are confused by the word “expectation” then good for you. Because our society uses the word differently in different situation without hesitation.

For example, many people view expectations as the root of all of our unhappiness.

Shakespeare famously said, “Expectation is the root of all heartache.” One Alcoholics Anonymous document refers to expectations as “premeditated resentments”. The Sufi poet Rumi said, “Whenever we manage to love without expectations, calculations, negotiations, we are indeed in heaven.” Adding expectations to love takes us from heaven to some other place. There is certainly a lot of truth that if you have no expectations in life you won’t be disappointed.

On the other extreme, many people believe that expectations motivate people to challenge themselves and to grow. You can’t go a day in Toronto without seeing a bumper sticker that proclaims some version of, “Expect the unexpected, believe in the unbelievable, and achieve the unachievable.”, or the classic, “Shoot for the moon, even if you miss you’ll be among the stars”.

So are expectations good or bad? I’ve certainly met many youth for whom expectations cause them to strive to become better people to create a better world. And I have certainly met many [older] people for whom expectations just make them crotchety. Is it really just the case that young people have great expectations, but actual life beats that out of us as we age, forcing us to either give up our expectations or become bitter? Surely there is more to it than that. Perhaps we don’t even know what we should expect from our expectations? What are your expectations of your expectations? And if you get that sorted out, what are your expectations of your expectations of your expectations?

Perhaps at this point you just think Rev. Paul should give up talking for Lent. But in truth, we should grapple with our expectations as part of our Christian faith. Remember that faith is about how we live our lives, so expectations are part of that.

I hope this is not news to you, but Christians hold different expectations of our faith, and most of them are biblical. And to see this, you do not even need to read from both the Old and New Testaments. You only need to read the epistles, in fact you only need to read the epistles written by St. Paul.

From 1 Thessalonians - the first book that was written in the New Testament - St. Paul states flatly that we are waiting for the return of Christ to take us to a heavenly place in bodily form. From chapter 4, “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the

dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.” (1 Thess 4:16-17) This was not written as a metaphor. The text describes what is called the “parousia”, where the faithful are bodily sucked up into heaven. This story is about the expectation of a physical “life boat” rescue, where human bodies will be sucked up in to the clouds and taken to heaven.

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, where in chapter 1 it says, “What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (1 Cor 15:50-52). This story is about the expectation of a “spiritual resurrection”, where we will change - perhaps our bodies will die - but our spirits will live on when “at the last trumpet” - which is at some time in the future - our spirits will be rescued and taken to heaven.

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote Galatians. In chapter 2 it says, “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:19-20). This story is about the expectation of living a spiritual life perhaps in the future but perhaps right now. The expectations are a bit unclear actually.

Later in his ministry, St. Paul wrote Romans. In chapter 6 it says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. For whoever has died is freed from sin.” (Rom 6:3-7). This story is about the expectation of living as Christ - ourselves, today. The expectation is no longer about the future at all, or any concept of heaven, the only expectation is about living today with the understanding that Christ is present in us,

with us, and through us, just as we say when we extinguish the Christ candle at the end of every service here.

This in part explains why there are different Christian messages from different churches and different preachers. If your faith is driven by a future expectation of going to heaven - good for you, because that message is biblical. But if your faith is driven by the idea that we live in the present tense, that the whole point of faith is to experience the peace and the presence of God right now - not in some future - good for you, because that message is also biblical.

Stories in the Bible do not agree on what Christians should be expecting. But Jesus - whose words are usually much more to the point than St. Paul had a few things to say about expecting to find peace - inner peace - the peace of God which passes all understanding. Jesus said, "I come that you might find peace, and find it abundantly". And from the gospel of John - as I say at every funeral I conduct - Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." This week in our weekly email I offered to demonstrate an exercise for finding inner peace that is almost a literal take on that passage. It also involves our expectations.

*Here, we have a short demonstration on finding peace*¹. This cannot be put into words very well, but perhaps the outline of the process will be helpful. The process goes a bit like this:

Introduction

- You want to come home to yourself, whatever that means for you.
- Perhaps you are looking for peace, joy, happiness that does not fade.

Setup

- I tell you I know a short exercise that may help you.
- It only takes a moment, but you have to come into my cabin to do it.

Self-Preparation

- Before you enter the cabin, please leave your mind behind.
- By "mind" I mean all your ideas about life, what life is or what life should be, and

¹ Adapted from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa5IF7x-ziA>.

-
- all the ideas you have about yourself.
- You live with many ideas about yourself, but they change all the time. Leave all of this before you come inside.
 - Leave behind any desires for the future, for yourself or others.
 - The exercise will only take a moment, and you are free to pick up your mind later when you leave the cabin. Nobody will steal it while you are inside the cabin.

Arrival

- When you feel you have left your mind, come into the cabin and close the door.
- I won't be giving you any new ideas. Nothing new here.
- You may be feeling, "now what?". There is no "now what".
- Just as it is. You are only here.
- You are here. Your senses are here. Your power to perceive is here. Your ability to experience is here.
- Experience being here as your self, stripped away from expectations. No projections here. No judgments. No stories. You are only here.
- Are you at peace? What day is it? What time is it? What religion does this experience belong to?

This Lent, give up your expectations, and you just might find peace. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Amen.