

September 8, 2019

Great Expectations

Shepherd's Grace Church

⁷Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. ⁹I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

¹⁰Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, ¹¹"Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess.'" ¹²To the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, ¹³"Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest, and will give you this land.'" ¹⁴Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan. But all the warriors among you shall cross over armed before your kindred and shall help them, ¹⁵until the LORD gives rest to your kindred as well as to you, and they too take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. Then you shall return to your own land and take possession of it, the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you beyond the Jordan to the east."

¹⁶They answered Joshua: "All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. (Joshua 1: 7-16)

For the next four weeks, we will be thinking about *Great Expectations*. In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens wrote a book by this same title. Ok, so I stole the title from Dickens. The importance of the messages is not diminished by the duplicity.

The *Great Expectations* I want to focus on touch only slightly on the themes that run through the book. They, instead, focus on what we expect from God and what God expects from us. Every year, about this time, we begin again with new programs that pick up where old programs have left off.

Our Adult Bible Study begins in earnest in the fall. Our youth group reorganizes and recommits to meetings and service to the congregation in the fall. Shepherd's Servants, our ministry for the youngest people in our congregation starts again after a summer vacation. Shepherd's Table continues as a yearlong commitment to the hungry in our community. We think about and work toward a successful Steak Fry as our signature fundraising event of the year. We plan for a pet blessing service, a Cowboy Church service, All Saints Day, Thanksgiving and finally, the beginning of Advent.

By my count, that is ten events in a thirteen week calendar. We are going to be busy as a church and it is easy when we are busy to forget why we are busy. As I say in

reflection on the book of Amos, sometimes we become so busy doing religion that we forget why we are doing it in the first place. In other words, our busyness of religion becomes a religion of busyness. Instead of being busy going through the motions, how much better to actually expect something from our worship.

I promise, God shows up every Sunday. The power of God's Holy Spirit is undeniable in our daily lives and in our care for one another. It is important that we expect God to be present with us during worship and in the activities of our church life. Great Expectations are the very least we can have as we make a commitment to spend time together on Sunday mornings.

Of course, we are not the only ones with expectations. When God shows up, (and God always shows up) God always has expectations! In Genesis 22, he tests Abraham because God wants to know if Abraham is willing to meet God's expectations. In Exodus 20, God gives the law to God's chosen people because God expects God's people to behave in a certain way! When God calls Naomi back home in the Book of Ruth, God expects her husband's family to act honorably toward her and her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

Through out the Bible, God lets us know that there are expectations on God's part as to the way we will act. Thankfully, these expectations are always governed by God's grace and mercy toward us, however, they are expectations nonetheless!

How will we react to God's expectations? Will we recognize his benevolent attitude toward us and willingly step up to meet God's hopes for us? Will we rebel and resist what God is calling us to do? Throughout history, our reaction has been largely a mixed bag of messages sent to God. We are human and we are inconsistent. We do not always do what we want to do, as the Apostle Paul says. Instead, some of us spend our lives doing what we do not want to do and wondering why.

In the book Great Expectations, the author, Charles Dickens creates a character called Fagan. Fagan is portrayed as criminal, a conniver; a person always looking for something for nothing. Early in the story, Fagan tells the central character Pip that money is all that matters in this world. There was a movie made about the book several years ago and in the movie, Fagan puts this sentiment to verse:

This life

One thing counts

In the bank

Large amounts

I'm afraid these don't grow on trees

You've got to pick a pocket or two

You've got to pick a pocket or two, boys

You've got to pick a pocket or two!

The world we live in reminds us, sometimes very matter-of-factly, that material possession is all that is important! Money is all that matters!

The book *Great Expectations* is set in a time and place where poverty are rampant. There are only two classes of people. The very wealthy and the very poor. The poor are portrayed as hopeless and Fagan represents the worst of all of them.

You've got to pick a pocket or two, he says. He says this because he believes he lives in a hopeless time and the only small glimmer of hope he can find is in stealing from others who might have just a bit more than he does. The reality of the world Dickens portrays is that all people are just trying to get ahead without considering who they will hurt or what the cost to their own integrity. Integrity is a luxury that cannot be afforded in a time such as this.

This morning, I am inviting you to step back several thousand years to another society that is founded on largely the same principles. The Hebrew people we meet this morning have been delivered from a culture of only two classes; the rich and the slaves. They have been used to being the slaves. They have known no other future than the hopeless future of fear and famine at the hands of their Egyptian masters. In Chapter 3 of the book of Exodus, God hears their cry for justice and answers.

God's solution to their slavery and servitude is to free them and let them live a life so dramatically different from what they were used to that most have no concept of how to exist in such circumstances.

As this people wanders in the wilderness, traveling from peril to peril, God gives them a glimpse of the promise God is holding out for them. He sends a group of them into the Promised Land as spies. The story is in Numbers Chapter 14 if you want to look it up. Anyway, twelve men go in and they see there the fruit of the land; a land so plentiful that the grapes had to be carried by two men and the rivers flowed with milk and honey.

The inhabitants, however were giants. They were a force so powerful that ten of the men could not imagine a way they could overcome the obstacle and possess that which God was giving them. Two, though could see the possibilities. As they made their report, Joshua and Caleb accounted that if God wanted the people to have the land, then it would be their land!

The people were mortified by what the 10 said and they shouted down the two. At this part of the story, I am often reminded that God does not always make obvious the magnitude of the blessings God intends to bestow upon us. Instead, God makes the obstacles so difficult that we, just like the wandering Hebrews, cannot imagine possessing the ability to take that which is in front of us. As a result, we fail to receive the blessing which God intends.

Those who cannot see beyond the challenges never find the fullness of relationship God intends us to enjoy with him. That is the case in today's world. That was the case for the Hebrew people who perished in the wilderness...all of them...all but two. Only Joshua

and Caleb, the two who were willing to walk by faith found their way out of the wilderness and into the fullness of God's plan. They expected big things from God. God expected big things from them. We meet them as they confront those expectations this morning!

God says to Joshua, "Be Strong and very courageous, making sure that you keep all the law my servant Moses has given to you." God's expectation is immediately put in front of Joshua...in front of us. Be Strong! What does God mean when he says he expects Joshua to "Be Strong?"

Strength is found not in the power of a person's life. People with large muscles are taken down regularly by people of seemingly smaller stature. Strength is not found in the intellect of a person. Highly intelligent people are regularly outsmarted by people who are willing to think and reason and work. Strength is an ability that comes from the willingness to recognize one's weakness and be willing to make adjustments that minimize or eliminate that weakness.

For Joshua, that strength came with the lessons learned from Moses, lessons given by God. Joshua's strength was to come from the law that was given him. It was the strength of personal integrity, the strength of strong moral conviction, the strength of a belief that he was a part of something greater than himself. He was a part of a plan. In that plan there was a great expectation for success.

Joshua was aware of Abram and the promise of this land that God had made to him and to his descendants over four hundred years before. He was aware of Isaac and Jacob, his ancestors. His strength came from the promise God made to them and to the generations that followed them through slavery and oppression. Joshua's strength came from his faith in God.

It was God talking to him that day, imploring him to live beyond his own personal aspirations and into something more! It was God, reminding him to press forward as he had when he was in the land before. It was God from whom all things come that was standing before him and guiding him into a promise.

God has made that same promise to all of us. We are to be mindful that it is God's kingdom we are pursuing and not our own. We do not have to pick a pocket or two, but we do have to have great expectations...expectations that God will fulfill every promise and will bring about a good thing for us. Our strength is in Him!

Our courage comes from the faithful witness of those who have gone before us. Sometimes we find courage in our own right but mostly, we are courageous because of those who have the actions we have observed in others whom we have admired. I suspect Joshua took great courage from the faithful actions of Moses as he led what God called a stubborn and stiff-necked people through the wilderness to the verge of a great promise.

Where does your courage come from? Are there people in your life whom you admire and try to emulate? Are there people who make good decisions and right choices even or maybe especially in difficult circumstances? Are you one of those people for someone

else? As we stand on the threshold of great expectation this morning, we stand together. Our strength and courage come from the journey we have made together and from the journey we are about to make. Great Expectations are not for the faint hearted. Great expectations are for those willing to imagine something bigger than themselves and work with others who share the same dream...poised to invite that dream into reality.

Joshua stood on just such a threshold as God invited him to a great expectation. "Know the words I have given Moses," God said. Do not just have them written down in a nice bible. Have them written on your heart! Do not turn from them.

Great expectations can only be truly great if we are willing to live into them in a right way. I suspect all of us know someone willing to dream big and eager to accomplish their dream no matter what the cost. These people who are willing to take short-cuts to success will never really know the feeling of accomplishment that comes from hard work and an honest concern for others. Truly great expectations come from acting in accordance with what we know is right and not from moving from the right or the left of it.

God has given us the right way through Moses on Mt. Sinai. For Joshua, the words spoken there are ever before him. He is to meditate on them day and night and never let them depart from his mouth. He doesn't need them written down. He has been rehearsing them since he was a child. The words echo the words of Passover that God commanded him and his family to eat in a hurry on that night before they were freed. In those words, he knows of God's plan for redemption. It is in the blessing of the third cup of the Seder supper and it is the promise God's chosen people have been moving toward since they left Egypt.

He also knows the promise of the Ten Commandments and the other Six Hundred and Three. God has given him the keys to freedom in these words as well. We know them in Jesus Christ. He is our cup of redemption. He is our Word that leads to life in salvation and the fulfilment of the promise of God. He is our Great Expectation.

In fact, where the world wants to argue that "You've got to pick a pocket or two," we want to respond that we expect great things without taking the short cuts. We have redemption in Jesus and we know that in Him is eternal life and salvation. We do not have to steal or lie or cheat to receive abundance. We, instead have to accept God's perfect gift of grace! That is our Great Expectation!

Joshua received this gift by following the word of God given in the law. We receive it by receiving the Word of God in Christ. The evangelist John says it this way, "The Law is given by God to Moses but Grace and Truth are given through Jesus Christ." (John 1)

Our prosperity and our success then depend not upon the size of our bank account but rather on the willingness we have to stand, strong and courageous, together; confident in God's word as our good guide and trusted map! Our promised land, our great expectation is not of this world, it is instead, a promise eternal in the heavens. If we are faithful to the direction God has given, we will be prosperous, but not in the way the world knows. We will be successful in recognizing that there are things more important

than material possession. We will be successful in working and witnessing to God's power in our world!

"Be Strong and Courageous," the Lord says in verse 9, knowing that I will be with you wherever you go! We can take heart in knowing that the power of our faith comes not only from the words of guidance and command God has given us but even more, knowing that God goes with us wherever we go!

God traveled with this stubborn and stiff-necked people by day and by night. God tabernacle with them when they were at rest. God made himself to them as they wandered in the wilderness. In all the difficulty and with all the rebellion they fomented, God was with them, never leaving, never forsaking, never abandoning them.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness of our lives, we can know, we can trust that God will be with us wherever we go. When we face sickness, sadness or the struggles of relationship with one another...God is there. When we face death and destruction...God is there. When we face joy and success in our lives and in our career or family...God is there! God is there with us where every we go!

What wilderness are you wandering in today? Where are you struggling? I mentioned earlier that as a church we are expecting great things as we start our fall season. Right now, we are struggling to get started with Shepherd's Servants. There are many young people in our congregation and some are here on Sundays but some Sundays some are here and some Sundays others are here. We are struggling to get them all in one place at one time so we can see what they want to do to grow in relationship with the Lord. We are in a wilderness there.

The middle school/high school youth group wants to work with other groups in our community in volunteer activities and in fellowship. We are struggling to reach out to other groups and make solid efforts. We are in a wilderness there.

The steak fry is right around the corner and while we are confident that everyone will step up and do their part, there is still an unknown until it actually happens. We are in a wilderness there.

These are just a few of the wilderness areas our church itself faces. There are many more. Still, we walk by faith, trusting God's promise. God's great expectation is that we keep his promise to us in our mouth and meditate on it day and night, never letting it depart from our lips. If we remember his words and take him with us in our hearts, God will be with us wherever we go!

The good news is that God does not intend to leave us in the wilderness. He knows we are not wilderness people. We are people who have a place and we seek that place so we can better serve Him. God does not intend us to wander around all of our lives looking for God's promises. God intends us to cross over into the promised land! This is our great expectation and it matches with God's will for us.

Having heard God's word of encouragement, Joshua understood what was to come next...it was the same thing that was to come first. In verse one of this chapter, God

says to Joshua, "Now lead this people that I have gathered, that has wandered in the wilderness into the land that I have promised to Moses and all your ancestors."

What is next is what was first! The promised land was always the destination for God's people. It was God's great expectation for them. It was their great expectation from him! Joshua understood this and for this reason he took command.

He called his commanders and ordered them into the camp. He said to them, "Tell the people to gather provision for in three days or less, they would cross over into the land the Lord was giving them."

There was great significance in the command Joshua gave. Suddenly, the people were instructed to gather food and supplies on their own. Why was that significant? You know! For forty years, the provision of the people had been provided by the Lord. They had manna and quail right outside their door while the wandered in the wilderness. Now, they were told to gather their own. They were told that they were strong enough and sufficient enough to go out on their own to gather and prepare. They were, in essence told that they were home...in their place...prepared to go to work. They were told that their long wilderness journey was over and they were on the last legs of their journey to a promised land where they could live and love and serve the Lord!

God does not intend us to spend our lives in the wilderness and when we find ourselves there, God does not intend to leave us there. While we are there, however, we can expect that God will take care of us, that He will guide us and encourage us and provide for us all we need. This is not our great expectation but it is an expectation we can have. God will walk with us in the wilderness and will guide us toward the promise that is best for us. That is our great expectation.

When the people heard the command from Joshua and the commanders, they were most likely excited at the prospect of finding their way out but they were also fearful. They did not know if they would be strong enough on their own to accomplish all that lay ahead of them. They had never completed the mission that God set before them and they did not know if they had all they needed to finish.

God anticipated that response. That is why, in Numbers 24, God gave the tribes of Ruben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh the land on the east bank of the Jordan. These people had been building homes and raising families and were established there in the land the Lord had given to them. The land was given, however with a condition.

When it was time for the timid to cross over into Canaan, tribes on the east bank would send their strongest men to assist. Joshua went to the leaders of these tribes and invited them to remember all the words Moses had given them. He reminded them of their commitment to their kinsmen and to the Lord. He gave them instructions about the help that was needed and the men responded. "All you have said, we have heard and all you have asked, we will do."

When we prepare to come into the completion of the Lord's work, very often it is a task we have never before taken on. Today, we learn that there are others out there who are willing to help us. There are others who are able to encourage and strengthen and

assist us as we enter into the Lord's great expectation of us. We do not walk alone, but rather as we cross the river and face the raging waters, we stand on the shoulders of giants who have faced these trials before and have come through them successfully. They have achieved God's great expectation and now, they are sharing their faith with us.

There is something else we should also remember and that is that when we come into the fulfillment of God's promise to us, we now become the others, the giants upon whose shoulders others will need to stand as they come into their great expectation. We are the generation that must stand strong in order that God's Kingdom might come and God's will might be done. God's great expectation is that we will remember others who helped us and we will respond to others who need us now!

Great expectations come through the word of God, through our faith in God and through the faithful witness of those who have lived that faith.

In the next three weeks, we will learn more of these great expectations and how they differ from the expectations of the world. We will learn that God's plan for us differs dramatically from the plans of the world and that we have a responsibility to stand in favor of God's plan so that God's expectation can be fully realized. Amen