

2024 Proper 24B

What do you expect?

Expectations are a big part of how we move through life. They shape our perceptions of what is happening and what we want to have happen. They can help or hinder how we relate to others, from the person bagging your groceries to the person you go to sleep next to.

Expectations can foster both hope and despair. They can help us set healthy boundaries, but they can also hinder our ability to form meaningful relationships.

Expectations can give us courage to step forward in faith. But they can also hold us back from trying new things. Under my senior picture in my high school year book, my answer to the question “Goals?” was “To do something unexpected.” It sounds very aspirational; in fact it came from a teenaged sense that I was too cautious. I wanted to find the courage to be unpredictable.

(I’m standing here as an Episcopal priest; pretty sure I nailed it!)

It all comes down to that question I asked earlier:
what do you expect?

Of yourself? Of loved ones? Of our favorite sport team?
Of our political leaders?

Of God?

Today's readings are all about people's expectations of God.

The story of Job is about a man whose expectations were shattered. He thought he understood how this God thing worked. You obey the rules, toe the line, make the right sacrifices at the right times, and you'll be blessed. No harm will come to you.

And then his world is blown apart. The book of Job is a kind of extended parable to challenge the prevailing belief of that time that prosperity was a reward for good behavior and suffering was a punishment for bad behavior. So when Job—upright, Law-abiding, faithful Job—enters into a period of profound suffering and loss, he can't understand. His friends buy into that framework that he must have done something wrong. He must have sinned. They urge him to examine his life for the place where he got it wrong and repent. Then everything will go back to the way it was.

But Job was clear: he had no secret sin. There was nothing to punish him for. His behavior was not the problem. It was God not acting the way God was "supposed to." God was not meeting his expectations.

Job's friend Elihu comes a little closer to getting it "right," although there is a danger in how he interpreted things as well. He says that "God's ways are not our ways." God won't always do what we expect God to do.

There is some comfort in his words, although they can lead to an understanding of God as capricious.

That's unexpected.

Eventually God appears and responds to Job's complaints. But not with an explanation or a promise that it's all going to be alright. God refuses to take the role of defending themselves. Instead, God asks, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

God refuses to be defined by Job's expectations. Instead God turns the tables on Job and tells Job **he** needs to be prepared to answer some tough questions.

The Episcopal Diocese of Montreal's commentary summarizes God's questions:

- Were you present at Creation?
- Do you know your way around the cosmos?
- Would you know how to operate the cosmos?
- Would creation and creatures obey your commands?
- Are you capable of providing for the animals and birds?

There was a time when I saw this as the bully's answer—God saying, "I can do whatever I like to you because I'm God and you're not."

But I have come to see the answer as more complicated than that.

You might say my expectations have changed.

God isn't exercising power simply because God can.

It's just that the cosmos God has created is much more complex than anything our human minds can comprehend. There is so much that is unexpected.

God isn't taunting Job. God is trying to make Job see that he wouldn't want to be in God's position. Notice the animals God refers to. They are part of the ecosystem, but they are predators, animals who need to kill other animals to feed their young. It's one thing to admire a lion when you're watching a National Geographic special; quite different if you're the gazelle she's attacking in order to feed her young.

I know a lot of people take comfort in the idea that our suffering is part of some larger plan of God. And if that works for you, great.

But that answer doesn't work for everyone, so I offer a somewhat different perspective on what God says here.

A change in our expectations of God.

While God is reminding Job that he can't see the big picture, I don't think God is telling him to just grit his teeth and deal with it.

Instead, I see God inviting Job to look from a different perspective. To remember that there is a lot that is good and beautiful in the universe. If he can look beyond his own suffering, and remember that God is trustworthy, he will get through whatever is going on. It's a call to let go of his own need for control, and respond instead with trust and grateful worship even when things aren't going his way. It's a way of acknowledging that hard truth we all must learn: we are not God. We don't have all the answers. We can't control everything that happens in our lives.

God is not going to meet our expectations. And yet God loves us.

The book of Job is the beginning of a shift in understanding the relationship between us and God that I believe comes to fruition in the Gospels. At the risk of horrifying my Hebrew Bible professors, I don't believe we can fully understand the book of Job until we read it as Christians, people who have heard and accepted the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There is a reason we begin our funerals with an anthem that includes passages from Job:

*As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.
After my awaking, he will raise me up;
and in my body I shall see God.
I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him
who is my friend, and not a stranger.*

The book of Job begins to teach that sometimes the only response God can give us that we can comprehend is the promise of being with us. Job's friends would have been much more comfort if they had been willing to just sit there with him in the ash heap and say nothing.

Sometimes our best response to a friend who is suffering is to refrain from offering explanations for why things are happening and instead just be with them, even if it's just in silence.

Willingness to share in the suffering of another person is the mark of Christ. In today's reading James and John approach Christ and ask to share in his GLORY. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Sigh. Unrealistic expectations!

They have completely missed the point of everything Jesus has been saying about what will happen when they arrive in Jerusalem.

When Jesus asks if they will be able to drink the cup he will drink, or be baptized the way he was, they misunderstand. They are saying yes to an image of a king extending his favor by inviting those around him to drink from HIS cup, a high honor in that society. But that's not what Jesus is offering: Jesus is asking if they will be able to share in the suffering he is about to undergo.

They blithely answer, “Oh yes, of course!” (One commentary this week compared it to the eagerness of a child who has asked for a puppy and assures his parents that he can handle all the care, without really knowing what he is committing himself to) Jesus, rather than lay out all the consequences of such a decision, simply says, “Yes, you will share in my cup.”

But oh, a very different cup than they are expecting!

Then Jesus tries one more time to redirect them: HE is not the one who will make the seating arrangements; that is God’s prerogative.

He is not in control of what will happen to him.

When Jesus calls us to be servants to one another, it is not just about humility, as important as that is.

It’s also about remembering that we are not in control of everything that happens.

It’s a call to let go of our expectations, and leave room for God to do something unexpected.

This doesn’t mean we should abandon all self-agency. This doesn’t mean we should just roll over and abdicate all responsibility. It just means that we need to be mindful of that basic truth: God is God. We are not. God has given us a lot of power and authority to act on

behalf of others to make the world a better place; but God has not given us all the power.

Thank God. History shows that human beings have a tendency to use our power to make a real mess of things.

We have to trust that even when things don't go the way we want them to, it doesn't mean God has abandoned us. It doesn't even necessarily mean that the immediate result is what God wants in the long term. It does mean that we have to trust that God will be with us, work with us and through us, whatever the circumstances, to continue to be beacons of God's continuing love for all of creation.

God's kingdom will appear in the most unexpected—but beautiful—ways. We just have to keep our eyes and minds and hearts open to the possibilities.

We have to be willing to expect the unexpected.

Amen.