

## "BEYOND EXPERIENCE AND EXPECTATION"

### INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of Christopher Fry's play, The Lady's Not for Burning, one finds this rather disquieting exchange:

Margaret Says, "Have any of you seen that poor child Alizon? I think she must be lost". Nicholas answers, "Who isn't? The best thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can. Now don't be worried. She can't be lost more than she was with us".

"The best thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can". One of those phrases that catches you're attention...starts.

### DEVELOPMENT

To minimize our alienation and to make sense of life is a concern that we all wrestle with. There's a lot of reality "out there" to be reckoned with - a bewildering assortment of values from which we must choose - a sizeable amount of chaos on which to impose some order - an obstacle course to master - a network of systems that call for resistance or compliance. And we have to do this reckoning, this choosing, this imposing, this mastering with a self that's housed in a vulnerable body, a body that is only a heart beat away from death, and to do all of this within a time span that at its longest is all too short! Quite an order, when you think about it!

Two resources have been given us with which to cope: these are experience and expectation. With all due respect to the existentialists, without experience and expectation none of us could live. A word about each one.

### EXPERIENCE

To begin with, experience is the word that we use to denote a remembered past. Fortunately, all the ground we break is not fresh. We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. Each generation does not have to discover anew the law of gravity, or the light bulb, or the quiet, inner workings of the moral law.

In a broader sense, the lessons of history are there to illumine our understanding. That bit of graffiti scribbled on Belshazzar's wall holds truth for nations in the present, as well as back there in the past.

Not only so, but we carry with us the lessons of our own personal history. Day by day, thank God, we are not called upon to break fresh ground. It is amazing, when one thinks on it, how often some remembered circumstance rises up to influence our conduct in the present. An illustration -

Back when I was in seminary - during the early Eisenhower years - I had a roommate, Burt, with whom I shared a washbasin. We had it worked out pretty well. He always shaved ahead of me in the mornings for which I had other advantages later on in the day. One morning Burt started to shave. He was in a hurry. There was studying to be done before our eight o'clock class and exam time was close at hand. After he had finished, he placed the razor down on the basin and bent over to rinse his face in cold water. As he reached for the faucet, eyes closed, his fingers slid right into the open face of the razor. An enormous gash developed that streaked the wash-basin with blood. It took Burt a while to stop the bleeding. To this day, wherever I have occasion to shave, I never place my razor near the faucet on the surface of the basin.

Experience.

Remembered bouts with indigestion monitor the food we eat. As a youngster, I could never eat hot dogs with any pork mixed in them or else I'd be sick the next day. Experience. To this day, I have to be careful about such things although I'll occasionally risk it out at Shea Stadium. I was reared in the foothills of the Adirondacks and remembered skids on ice upstate make me very careful when driving in the Winter. The consequences of a loss of temper urge us in the direction of a more patient nature. Recollections of former intimate moments with God come back to haunt our slackness in religion. Experience.

And so it is that we build upon the past. We heed the advice of those who have lived a bit longer and seen a bit more than we have. And those who will not heed the lessons of the past are bound to repeat the mistakes of the past. Yesterday can help us now.

EXPECTATION But joined to experience is this other faculty that we call expectation. Not only can we recall the past, but we can also project the future. We know, for instance, that certain courses will lead to predictable ends. The Club of Rome, for example, extrapolated a future for the world from present tendencies. chartered

This, too, also happens on a lesser degree in our personal histories. So many years in school, then a degree and a job. So many dollars set aside each week, then money for a car. So many weeks of careful dieting, then a healthier, more attractive body. So many hours at the keyboard, then competence up and down the piano. So many hours at the bar, then incompetence at work, or trouble at home. So much time with God each day, then a surer spiritual discernment. Without expectations, we would be as good as dead. The present would entomb us. The curtain might just as well fall.

Experience and expectation enable us to live in the present with some degree of sanity. Some of us lean more to experience. That is, we tend to be past-oriented. I think of the meetings I've attended over the years where some new idea was defeated on one of two grounds: we've done that before, or we've never done that before. And the older we get, the more we tend to rely on experience.

Others of us are given more to expectation. This is largely true of the young who prefer experimentation to experience.

In a viable society, I believe that both are necessary. All experience and no expectation produces dullness, boredom. On the other hand, no experience and all expectation would produce a fatal recklessness. Experience and expectation.

BIBLICAL FAITH GOES BEYOND BOTH Biblical faith goes beyond both. And this is the theme of today's message. As I see it, Biblical faith goes beyond both and adds to life the element of surprise.

Experience rests on memory. Expectation rests on calculation. But surprise is nourished by faith, and it becomes - in turn - the source and ground of our hope. We need to read our Bibles

Read your Bible in 1976 with the throttle of your imagination wide open. As you do, it will astound you how many surprises are packed in there among its pages. History is more than repetition because God's "new" keeps breaking in. History is more than calculation for more than could ever have been expected has happened and keeps happening even today in our time!

Israel itself is a surprise among the nations. I hope you caught the surprise in that reading from Genesis earlier in our service. Abraham is 99 years old. His wife is well past child bearing age. The elderly patriarch is yawning his way through an unwanted retirement beneath the oaks of Mamre. One day he looked up and sees three men going by. Desperate for company, he invites them in and offers them hospitality.

One of the three turns to Abraham rather boldly and asks, "Where is your wife?" Abraham replies, "What kind of a place do you think this is? She's back in the kitchen". The man undaunted says, "She's going to become pregnant". With this, laughter is heard in the kitchen. Sarah has been listening in. And when the visitors leave, God says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and ask, 'Shall I indeed bear a child now than I am old?' Is anything too hard for God?" Three chapters later, we read that "The Lord did to Sarah as he had said and Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age". Issac is born. The promise is kept. Surprise.

Read on in the Bible. A tiny minority, Israel's future is aborted by captivity in Egypt. Egypt has all the guns, all the money, all the power, all the food - enough to pin these people down forever. Then - WHAMMO - a surprise. God calls a daring play at the Red Sea, and commands Moses to go through the center without much blocking. And, he does.

David, years later, goes out against Goliath. Experience says that the young boy should at least be properly attired if he's going to do battle with the giant, Goliath. Saul's armor is offered. David graciously rejects it. And armed with a sling-shot and one or two small stones and lots of faith and courage - WHAMMO - surprise. The giant falls to earth. Experience and expectation would have said otherwise.

AND SO IT GOES Israel it seems has always lived in an environment of hostility. Surrounded by larger nations that could, at least on paper, seem to swallow her up. Yet, she survives. Israel is described as extending from Dan to Beersheba. When I first learned those two extension points of the kingdom my own mind visualized a vast expanse. But Dan to Beersheba is only about 150 miles. A minister would drive it in three hours. A layman in two. New York to Albany. About the size of Vermont. Yet, Israel survives. And she serves as the carrier of promise. This has to be one of the surprises of modern times.

And so it goes. A man is born to obscure parents in a backwoods province at the circumference of the world of that time and becomes the most unforgettable character ever to walk the stage of human history, writing "The Greatest Story Ever Told". His close friends and loyal followers are somewhat of a ragtag band, non-descript - yet they rise up and turn the world upside down. Surprise. We never would have thought it. Put to death on an instrument of shame, but that cross becomes a cherished symbol of invincible love.

And always the surprise comes. While we're busy examining all the facts - observable facts - God moves in to surprise. Who would have thought an unimpressive wisp of a man, clad in a loin cloth and carrying a bamboo stick would be the one to set India free from foreign domination. What a surprise.

Who would have thought that a tired black woman pressing for a seat on a bus in Montgomery would ignite a social revolution. Surprise.

Who would have thought that the most powerful nation in the world would come a cropper in the rice patties of Vietnam. Or, who would have thought that a policeman in Washington noticing a strip of tape across the lock of a door in a new development would unset a president and change the face of our American history. Surprise!

SURPRISE Beyond experience and beyond expectation surprises come. And whence come such "surprises"? They are the "doings of the Lord". That's it. In other words, there is ANOTHER at work. Call them, if you will, signs of what our Bible calls "The Kingdom of God". And so we pray, "Thy Kingdom come". Jesus said to the Pharisees,

"The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Lo - here it is, or there it is'....for behold the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you".

A way of mind. A state of affairs - something that cannot be captured by a nation, a party, a system. Nobody can say, "Lo - here it is; lo, it's there". "He's got it. I've got it". It's real. It's made up of some strange twists, the unpredictable, and always fresh starts.

I often feel that experience and expectation become the railings to which you and I so desperately cling as we move along through life. God, at the same time, is trying to shake our hands loose and alert us to His surprises. Before this day is ended, He could knock you off your feet. Something you read. Something you hear. Some one you meet. Some experience of failure or of success. Some prayer spoken in a moment of sheer exhaustion. An unwelcome illness or some enforced idleness. You may be finished with yourself - but remember this - God isn't.

Leave some room for the surprises of God to occur in your life. And remember, too, that the Gospel has to do with life as it might become. As you go on from this day, do not fail to "factor in" the Kingdom. God is alive. He is still at work on the premises. There is this creative, newing, restless love operating in the universe. Somewhere, somehow when you least expect it - something good can happen.

CONCLUSION Surprise? Friends, that's what faith is all about. Faith moves us out beyond experience and beyond expectation. Surprises of healing can occur. Surprises of achievement can take place. Surprises of any kind. I believe it. Impossible you say? I answer, yes - but only the impossible is sure because it belongs to God. Let us remember this as we share in the renewing of life around in the weeks and months ahead.

PRAYER Forgive us, O God, that so often we end up living as enlightened pagans rather than as children of great faith. Break open our little systems. Challenge our confidence in common sense until we make room in our lives for visitations from "on High". So shall we be surprised and convinced afresh that Thou art God - alive and still at work, and that thy kingdom shall prevail. Lead us on, O King Eternal. Amen