

"THE SHAPING ROLE OF EXPECTATION"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 23, 1983

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INTRODUCTION

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Conceding the basic truth of his insight and sobered by its warning, nonetheless I want to make a case today for the shaping role that expectation plays in human life.

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WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF YOURSELF

Suppose we begin by asking, just what do you expect of yourself? We don't often ask this question. We'd rather speak of what we expect of others - our elected officials, our schools, our teachers, our church and its leaders, society-at-large, or perhaps the family next door. I think that part of our human nature is to pressure others and to ease up on ourselves...and what we expect of ourselves.

And yet - what we make of life and what we let life make of us is by and large an "inside" job. The critical controls, at so many points, are in our hands. As the Moderator of Smokenders once said in the closing moments of a meeting, "The right mental attitude can achieve any goal".

Yes, we need to put that into our pipe and smoke it...for there are many among us and around us who have resigned themselves to a sort of fatalism. They see themselves as the hopeless, hapless victims of outside forces. "Whatever will be, will be" is the way they approach life. I know of a man whose fatalistic approach to life was even woven into his theology. He was a Scots Presbyterian. And one day he fell down a flight of stairs and landed ingloriously in the cellar. He slowly picked himself up, brushed off his suit and said, "Now, I'm glad that's over."

Why do we so often insist on seeing ourselves as prisoners of our genes, our times, our environment? Why do we sometimes live as though we were waiting for the next blow to fall? It always chills me to recall that pessimistic epitaph, "I expected this and here I am." Quite a contrast to the spirit of that line that was one of the late Robert Kennedy's favorite lines:

"Some men see things as they are, and say 'why'. I dream things that never were, and say 'why not?'"

So let's ask ourselves, honestly and before God: what are your expectations for yourself? Are you simply getting old, or are you "growing" old? There's a world of difference between those terms - "getting old" and "growing old". Have you taken the pains in recent days to set some goals for yourself - to improve your mind, to expand your spirit, to deepen and thicken your consciousness of life?

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Do we have misguided expectations regarding God? Could that be a part of our trouble? Remember that John the Baptist, whom Jesus loved and appreciated to the full, had his doubts and disappointments. Remember how John from Herod's prison sent messengers to inquire of Jesus, "Art Thou He that should come, or look we for another?" Jesus had not convinced John that He was the "Expected One", primarily because John's expectations were off the mark. John was one of those "all or nothing" types who felt that the morally unfit should be purged from the ranks, but Jesus had said, "they who are whole need not a physican, but they that are sick". This shook John. John had some inaccurate expectations of what the coming One would be.

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Or another situation. Some carry the notion around with them that God is there to vindicate wrongs committed against them. This city is filled with people who are biding time, shopping from Church to Church, from lawyer to lawyer.... in quest of a way to get back at somebody who did them a wrong. Jesus faced this type, too, that day when "one of the multitude said to Him, 'Teacher...bid my brother divide the inheritance with me'". That troubling question of how mother and daddy's wealth should be distributed had been eating away at him. His brother was doing him wrong. He expected Jesus would act to set things right.

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CLOSING

Now, where is the Gospel in all of this? It emerges at this point. The Good News is that He loves the world - not the Church - He loves the world, all that are in it, and that He expects good things of us - His children. He believes in us.

There's a line in the New Testament that is almost too magnificent to touch. "Do you know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" The Gospel writer used the word kindness - not judgement. Chances are we would have said judgement. Kindness is what the Gospel writer used. What can we do when He keeps on coming, being good to us despite our selfish ways. This is the heart of the Gospel. Sometimes this is all we have to go on - that God's hasn't quit on us yet, that He hasn't turned off the lights, rolled up the stage, closed down the show, brought the actors to judgement. For reason known to His great heart alone, He keeps expecting us to be the sort of people He meant us to be.

ILLUSTRATION

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"He believes in you". "He believes in you" ...

And so He does, my friend. Never forget that. He believes in you, and expects great and good things...perhaps there's some one in the congregation today who needs to hear that.

PRAYER

Knowing, Lord, deep in our hearts that You do believe in us, and therefore expect great things from us...may that word strengthen us for the living of these days.

Let your loving expectations pull us forward that we may live useful and unfettered, unselfish lives. Grant, Lord, that we should never quit on life or be content with being only half alive. In the spirit of Christ who expects great things from those who confess His name - we pray. Amen

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