

MID_WEEK MARCH 3, 2021

GIVING UP EXPECTATIONS

GENESIS 12:1-4, JOHN 3:1-17

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON PRACTICES OF LENT IS THAT PEOPLE WILL OFTEN GIVE UP SOMETHING SUCH AS SOFT DRINK, CHOCOLATE, OR SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THIS PERIOD OF TIME. THE IDEA IS THAT BY GIVING UP SUCH THINGS, EACH TIME WE DESIRE TO HAVE A COKE OR EAT A COOKIE, OR CHECK OUR STATUS ON FB, IT WILL CAUSE US INSTEAD, TO PAUSE AND CONSIDER CHRIST'S SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS.

DURING LENT THIS YEAR, WE ARE ASKING YOU TO CONSIDER GIVING UP SOME MORE UNTRADITIONAL SORTS OF THINGS.

TODAY WE ARE LOOKING AT HOW OUR FAITH WOULD BE IMPACTED IF WE WERE ABLE TO GIVE UP OUR EXPECTATIONS.

EXPECTATIONS ARE FUNNY THINGS. WE USUALLY HAVE SUCH HIGH EXPECTATIONS ABOUT LIFE AND HOW WE THINK IT WILL BE, BUT ALL TOO OFTEN, OUR EXPECTATIONS END UP FALLING SHORT OF WHAT WE THOUGHT SHOULD HAPPEN. BUT WHAT ABOUT WHEN OUR EXPECTATIONS DON'T MATCH UP WITH OUR REALITY, ESPECIALLY ON THE REALLY IMPORTANT MATTERS OF LIFE? WHAT ABOUT WHEN OUR EXPECTATIONS OF GOD DON'T MATCH UP WITH OUR EXPERIENCES? WHAT THEN? SEE, THE TRUTH IS, WE HAVE EXPECTATIONS OF GOD. AND SOMETIMES, IF WE'RE BEING HONEST WITH OURSELVES, HE FAILS THOSE EXPECTATIONS.

WITHOUT QUESTION, WE REGULARLY CREATE EXPECTATIONS OF GOD. IN OUR MINDS, WE EXPECT GOD TO DO CERTAIN THINGS. WE EXPECT GOD TO BEHAVE IN CERTAIN WAYS. WE EXPECT GOD TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF OUR LIVES IN ONE WAY AND NOT IN ANOTHER WAY. AGAIN, THIS CAN BE GOOD, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE VERY, VERY DANGEROUS. THE DANGER IS THAT OUR EXPECTATIONS OFTEN KEEP US FROM LISTENING TO GOD OR FOLLOWING GOD WHEN GOD ACTS IN WAYS OR RESPONDS IN A MANNER THAT ARE FAR DIFFERENT FROM WHAT WE HAD ANTICIPATED. I THINK ABOUT MY OWN EXPECTATIONS OF GOD, WHEN I WAS PREGNANT WITH OUR SECOND, AND THIRD, AND FOURTH CHILD, ONLY TO BE DISAPPOINTED THAT THOSE CHILDREN WERE NEVER BORN. OR WHEN I EARNESTLY PRAYED FOR A LOVED ONE TO BE HEALED OF A PAINFUL, CRIPPLING DISEASE, ONLY TO WATCH THEM IN THEIR DAILY STRUGGLE TO LIVE A "NORMAL" LIFE.

I HAVE FOUND THAT WHEN I FIND MYSELF MOST DISAPPOINTED WITH LIFE, IT'S NOT BECAUSE SOMETHING IN LIFE HAS FAILED ME. RATHER MY EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT LIFE "OUGHT TO BE" HAVE FAILED ME. GOD HAS NOT FAILED ME – BUT MY EXPECTATIONS OF GOD HAVE FAILED ME.

THE STORIES OF ABRAHAM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND NICODEMUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ARE CLASSIC EXAMPLES OF THIS TRUTH. BOTH ABRAHAM AND NICODEMUS, LIKE ALL HUMAN BEINGS, HAD EXPECTATIONS OF AND IDEAS ABOUT GOD. IN TERMS OF ABRAHAM, AN OLDER MAN WHO HAD ALREADY LIVED A LONG LIFE, CERTAINLY THOSE EXPECTATIONS INCLUDED WHAT GOD WOULD OR WOULD NOT CALL HIM TO DO AT THE AGE OF 75 AND AS SOMEONE WHO ALONG WITH HIS WIFE HAD NEVER BEEN ABLE TO HAVE CHILDREN. IN TURN, WHEN GOD SPOKE AND CALLED ABRAHAM TO UPROOT HIS LIFE AND PREPARE TO BECOME THE FATHER OF A GREAT NATION, BOTH IDEAS WERE LIKELY NOWHERE TO BE FOUND ON ABRAHAM'S RADAR SCREEN. AND IT SHOWED.

SEE, ABRAM THOUGHT HE HAD FIGURED OUT WHO GOD WAS, AND HAD EXPECTATIONS OF WHERE HE SHOULD BE IN HIS OWN LIFE, WHAT HIS FAMILY WOULD LOOK LIKE. BUT INSTEAD, GOD SHATTERS THOSE EXPECTATIONS AND CALLS ABRAM AND ASKS HIM AND SARAI TO HEAD OUT INTO AN UNKNOWN FUTURE, WITHOUT DIRECTION, OR MUCH KNOWLEDGE OF WHERE THEY WERE GOING. THEY GOT LOST ALONG THE WAY. THEY MADE PLENTY OF MISTAKES – A WHOLE SERIES OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

BUT THE SCRIPTURES CALL THEM RIGHTEOUS, BECAUSE THEY HEARD GOD'S CALL IN THE MIDDLE OF THEIR SEEMING SECURITY AND CERTAINTY, AND THEY LEFT THE EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT THEIR LIVES WERE SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE AND FOLLOWED THIS CALL TO A LAND GOD PROMISED TO SHOW THEM.

FOR NICODEMUS, WITH MUCH EXPERIENCE AS A LEADER AMONG THE JEWISH PEOPLE AT THE TIME HE MET JESUS, THERE WERE ALSO IDEAS AND EXPECTATIONS FIRMLY IN PLACE IN HIS MIND AS TO HOW GOD WOULD ACT. HE THOUGHT HE HAD GOD ALL FIGURED OUT. IN TURN, WHEN HE MET JESUS, WHO BEGAN TO TALK ABOUT FAITH BEING MORE THAN OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW AND BEING BORN AGAIN AS A CHILD OF GOD RATHER THAN BEING GOD'S CHILD FROM BIRTH BY BEING BORN A JEW, NICODEMUS TOO WAS CAUGHT OFF GUARD. AFTER ALL, VERY LITTLE THAT JESUS SAID WAS IN KEEPING WITH WHAT NICODEMUS HAD COME TO EXPECT. AND THE PROBLEM WITH NICODEMUS WAS THAT HIS FAITH WAS TOO SMALL. IT WAS

BASED ON AN EXPECTATION FAR SHORT OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF A GOD OF LOVE AND MERCY WHO SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS SON JESUS. IT'S SO TRUE OF WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW, ISN'T IT? OUR EXPECTATIONS OF GOD – AND OF OURSELVES AS GOD'S PEOPLE – ALWAYS FALLS SHORT.

FOR BOTH ABRAHAM AND NICODEMUS, THE DANGER WAS THAT BOTH WERE TEMPTED TO DISMISS THEIR PROFOUND ENCOUNTERS WITH THE PRESENCE OF GOD BECAUSE THOSE SAME ENCOUNTERS TUGGED AT THE BOUNDARIES AND DARED TO RESHAPE THEIR IDEAS OF WHO GOD WAS AND HOW GOD ACTED.

AGAIN, THE SAME DANGERS EXIST FOR YOU AND FOR ME EVERY SINGLE DAY. WHEN GOD FAILS TO ANSWER OUR PRAYERS AS WE HAD EXPECTED, DO WE GET ANGRY, THROW UP OUR HANDS AND DENOUNCE OUR FAITH OR DO WE ALLOW FOR THE POSSIBILITY THAT PERHAPS OUR EXPECTATIONS WERE WRONG TO BEGIN WITH?

WHEN WE READ THE SCRIPTURES AND A NEW INSIGHT IS BROUGHT TO OUR MIND THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT, DO WE QUICKLY DISMISS IT BECAUSE IT IS SOMETHING THAT WE HAVE NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT BEFORE, OR, ARE WE OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT GOD MAY BE REVEALING SOMETHING TO US THAT WILL RESHAPE HOW WE LIVE AND HOW WE APPROACH OTHERS.

AND, WHEN WE SENSE GOD TUGGING AT US TO DO SOMETHING, TO ENGAGE IN A NEW MINISTRY, TO REINVEST IN OUR CHURCH OR TO RECTIFY A LONG DORMANT RELATIONSHIP, DO WE REMAIN CLOSED MINDED CONVINCED GOD COULD NEVER CALL US TO THAT SORT OF WORK? OR DO WE OPEN OURSELVES UP TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT EVEN AT THIS STAGE IN OUR LIVES, THERE MIGHT BE SOMETHING NEW THAT GOD HAS IN STORE FOR US TO DO?

THERE'S A WORD FOR SUCH A TURNING POINT – WHEN YOU TURN FROM WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE TO WHAT GOD HAS CALLED YOU. IT'S CALLED BEING BORN AGAIN. IT'S A FANTASTICAL NOTION, AS NICODEMUS REMINDS US STRAIGHT AWAY WITH HIS QUESTIONS: "HOW CAN ANYONE BE BORN AFTER THEY HAVE GROWN OLD?" THIS IMAGERY DISTURBS THIS SELF-ASSURED SCHOLAR. HOW CAN ANYONE EXPECT TO CRAWL BACK INTO A PLACE OF VULNERABILITY AND DEPENDENCE, ONLY TO EMERGE AND SEE THE WORLD ANEW? HOW CAN ANYONE EXPECT TO BE RE-FORMED AND RE-CREATED TO LOVE MORE, FORGIVE MORE, STEP OUT MORE? CAN WE ACTUALLY SURRENDER OUR EXPECTATIONS OF HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE AND OPEN OURSELVES TO THE SPIRIT THAT BLOWS WHERE WE WOULD NOT CHOOSE?

TO BE BORN AGAIN IS IN PART TO LET GO OF YOUR EXPECTATIONS. IT'S NOT THAT WE SHOULDN'T EXPECT ANYTHING FROM GOD. IT'S JUST THAT WE CAN NEVER BE SO CERTAIN AND SECURE THAT WE BELIEVE GOD IS LIMITED TO OUR EXPECTATIONS. OR THAT THE BIBLE MEANS ONLY WHAT WE ALREADY THINK AND KNOW. OR THAT THE MESSIAH CAN ONLY DO WHAT WE HAVE PLANNED FOR A MESSIAH TO DO. OR THAT THE KINGDOM WILL COME AS WE BELIEVE IT SHOULD. OR THAT JESUS CAN ONLY BE WHO WE HAVE ALREADY FIGURED OUT THAT HE IS. SUCH ASSURANCE TURNS OUT TO BE AS DARK AS THE NIGHT NICODEMUS CAME TO JESUS IN THE FIRST PLACE.

AND THIS WONDROUS TALK OF BEING BORN AGAIN PROMPTS IN NICODEMUS A QUESTION, "HOW CAN THIS BE?"

IT'S A QUESTION PROMPTED BY THE ONE WHO IS ALWAYS EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS. THERE ARE THOSE WHO COME TO HIM AND ASK TO BE ABLE TO SEE, AND HE "SAVES" THEM. THERE ARE THOSE THAT ONLY WANT TO PREPARE HIS BODY, WHEN WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK HE RISES. THERE ARE SO MANY OF US WHO ONLY WANT TO SURVIVE, AND HE TELLS US OF HOW HE HAS COME TO GIVE US LIFE, ABUNDANT LIFE. HOW CAN THIS BE?

IT'S A QUESTION OF FAITH. AND THE PROCESS OF FAITH IS EMBODIED HERE IN THIS PASSAGE FROM NICODEMUS – MOVING FROM THE STATEMENT "WE KNOW" TO THE QUESTION "HOW CAN THIS BE?"

I HOPE YOU HAVE MADE THAT SHIFT IN YOUR LIFE, BUT IF YOU HAVE YOU ARE NOT ALONE. YOU JOIN ALL THOSE WHO CONCEIVED OF A GOD LIMITED TO THEIR EXPECTATION, AND SUDDENLY ENCOUNTER GOD IN THE PERSON OF JESUS. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THEY THOUGHT THEY KNEW THE WORD OF GOD, BUT THEN ENCOUNTER THE LIVING WORD IN FLESH. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THEY HAD PLANS FOR WHAT JESUS WOULD DO, THEN HE STARTS TO TURN OVER THE TABLES OF THEIR CAREFULLY ARRANGED AGENDA. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THEY KNEW HOW THE KINGDOM SHOULD COME, BUT THEN HE PROCLAIMS THAT IT IS NEAR TO THOSE WHOM THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THEY WENT RUNNING AFTER HIM – LEFT THE SHOPS, THE BOATS, SCREAMING "WE HAVE FOUND THE MESSIAH," THEN HE SHOWS THEM THE CROSS. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THE WRITER JAN RICHARDSON HAS SAID WHEN WE HEAR THIS QUESTION – IN THE BIBLE OR IN OUR OWN LIVES – IT MEANS THE SPIRIT IS "UP TO SOMETHING." (4) LIKE MARY RESPONDING TO THE ANGEL GABRIEL'S INVITATION EARLIER IN THE STORY. BEFORE SHE SAYS

“YES” TO BEARING THE ONLY SON OF GOD, SHE ASKS, “HOW CAN THIS BE?” WE HEAR THE QUESTION AND KNOW THAT GOD IS IN THE MIDST BRINGING ABOUT SOMETHING NEW, BEYOND WHAT WE EVER COULD HAVE IMAGINED OURSELVES. SOMETHING IS BEING BORN. OR BORN AGAIN.

WE SEE HOW ABRAM RESPONDS TO GOD’S OUTRAGEOUS CALL – “GO, LEAVE EVERYTHING YOU KNOW BEHIND, TO A PLACE I WILL SHOW YOU, AND I WILL BLESS YOU TO BE A BLESSING FOR EVERY FAMILY OF THE EARTH.” ABRAM RELEASES HIS EXPECTATIONS AND GOES.

WE KNOW HOW MARY ACCEPTS GOD’S WONDROUS INVITATION WITH INCREDIBLE OPENNESS, “HERE AM I, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD; LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.”

WHAT ABOUT NICODEMUS? LATER IN THE STORY, JESUS IS TEACHING AND ONE MAN – A RELIGIOUS LEADER, NICODEMUS – STANDS UP TO DEFEND HIM AGAINST HIS CRITICS. THEN MUCH LATER, AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER WHEN ALL WAS DARK, AS THEY WONDER WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW THAT HE IS GONE, NICODEMUS JOINS JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA IN PREPARING THE CRUCIFIED BODY OF JESUS FOR BURIAL. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, NICODEMUS COMES AND ANOINTS THE BODY OF JESUS. AND THEN IS NEVER HEARD FROM AGAIN. HE PROBABLY THOUGHT IT WAS ALL OVER. FINAL. JUST AS HE’D EXPECT. JUST AS WE’D EXPECT.

BUT THE NEXT DAY, DON’T YOU THINK HE WAS CLOSE BY WHEN, WITH THE SUN RISING, MARY RAN THROUGHOUT THE RANKS OF THE FOLLOWERS THAT REMAINED, “I HAVE SEEN THE LORD, COME, QUICKLY, I HAVE SEEN THE LORD.” I CAN IMAGINE HIM – NICODEMUS – STEPPING FORWARD INTO THE LIGHT THAT WAS DAWNING ABOVE THE HILL, WITH THE WORDS FORMING ON HIS LIPS, “HOW CAN THIS BE?”

WE CAN SAY THESE WORDS WITH HIM. WE CAN KNOW THIS WONDER OURSELVES. BUT FIRST WE MUST GIVE UP OUR OWN WAY – EVEN OUR BEST EXPECTATIONS – TO COME TO KNOW THE WAY OF JESUS.