

January 2, 2000

Matthew 6:19-34  
John 16:19-33

## WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

Well, we are still here. It may be that all the confusion is not over, but then, when was it ever? And we are still alive here: some of us complain; some of us rejoice; some of us can't make up our minds. It is good news and bad news. The bad news is that we did not get to go to Heaven yet. The good news is that we get to go on serving our Lord right here, for as long as He gives us time and life. Isn't that marvelous? What did we expect?

I expect to go on preaching and teaching for a little longer. I cannot tell for sure, but that is what I expect. I preached 1,924 sermons in the twentieth century. I expect I will not have to preach that many in the twenty-first century. I expect, and many hope. But what do *you* really expect?

We are told that ancient peoples watched the approach of the winter solstice with avid interest and with considerable alarm. Why were the days getting shorter? Was the sun dying? Was there some great battle going on in the heavens between the gods of darkness and the gods of light? And the invariable questions arose: Have we done something wrong? Are we being punished? Was there anything we could have done to change our fate? A little self-centered, no doubt, but part of human nobility. Most of us just assume that we are part of life's drama in some significant way. We only doubt it when we are depressed. In some other cultures, this is not assumed at all. Some people live their whole lives assuming that they have no particular individual importance. And they are not depressed; that's just the way it is. Are they happier or sadder than we are? I don't know; is there some way to tell? Most of us were raised to assume that all Creation was created for us. Two of our own most recent generations have been doubting this with growing scorn, yet their egos seem in no way diminished by their views. Responsibility, nurture, and stewardship come more logically and deeply from the Genesis stories than do abuse and tyranny. Pride (*hubris*) and a self-centered dominion are the *satah* element, not the Judeo-Christian perspective.

Sacrifices and rituals abound in our history – efforts to help us meet and deal with the crisis of the changing seasons. Interesting that

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most of our responses lean toward exuberant celebration. Dance and sing and be joyful! The gods are sad or discouraged, and we need to have a big party to help cheer them up and encourage them. Behind the scenes there is usually a more serious note. After the party we will clean up our act – be more responsible, more grateful, more attentive to the gods (the true principles of life). So, in hundreds of different ways, humans have greeted the new year in joyful celebration. Mixed in with that are gratitude for having survived the year now past, and resolutions for doing some things better in the year to come. Naturally that requires taking inventory. It is difficult to make any changes if you cannot decide what changes to make. And it's not a simple matter. What a huge amount of time and life I have spent sitting in committee meetings that were trying to decide what changes to make. Even sincere, well-meaning people can argue endlessly over which changes to make, and then argue even more hotly about how to make them.

In any case, a new year is also a time to take personal inventory, and to decide what changes to make. You have all done that already for this year, have you not? Or did some of you get sidetracked in the middle of the process? Our political parties are now hotly debating what changes we should make, and most people assume that whoever makes the best case will win the coming elections. Certainly the business world is at work to discern what changes it needs to make. Many businesses know that their survival depends on their conclusions, and how well they implement them. Do any of us assume that our spiritual survival depends on what changes we decide to make, and how well we implement them? Naw, we can always be forgiven. If my way of life is sad and wrong, how much forgiveness does it take to turn my life into joy and gladness?

Am I just getting old, or are New Year celebrations actually getting more secular and empty? Increasingly, they seem to me “full of sound and rejoicing – signifying nothing.” Perhaps it has always been that way and I simply didn't notice that we all have to bring our faith with us if we want a real celebration.

But I doubt that the emptiness is all my imagination. Our society really is becoming more secular. There is no drama. The earth is just spinning in its natural orbit, and the seasons come and go in boring reaction to natural law. It doesn't mean anything. There is nothing to celebrate or get alarmed about. Sunsets used to be beautiful – but really, they are just dirt in the sky. And there are so many people – how could

any of us be special? Destiny is just a word for those who have never grown up enough to get over being romantic. More and more people claim relief at the demise of our myths, positive or negative. How freeing, they say, to be rid of false constructs, be they of God or of Satan. So much better to just be calm, take each day as it comes, and not have to worry about all the tacked-on meanings or fears or hopes or obligations. It's not as obvious quite yet, but as soon as the habits from the past wear down, it will also be the end of community, and the end of any long-term relationships. (Maybe Taoism really will win in the end.)

In any case, modern New Year celebrations are really wonderful, aren't they? So many people having so much fun. It's enough to bring tears to your eyes. A great, nationwide fanfare introducing nothing, celebrating nothing, meaning nothing for those who participate. But the new year began so long ago already, who can even remember it? Never mind New Year resolutions; we are already getting ready for tax season. And whatever legends may be coming from the south of us, they will probably not have power enough to save us from taxes.

One of the nice things about life, when we finally realize it, is the fact that we don't have to go with or stay with the things that do not lead us onward. Never mind the calendar; a new year – and a New Life – is always waiting for us. *“Behold, He is making all things new.”* The power of Jesus Christ is greater than the power of all the lesser gods being worshipped all around us.

To be sure, that is in direct contradiction to what we are being taught by the modern myths of psychology, sociology, and large portions of astrology, government policy, nutrition, et al. They tell us that we come from gene pools, parental patterns, complexes, and harsh experiences that shape, mold, and therefore control us far beyond our power to do anything about it. Of course, none of the gods and none of our idols operate without some evidence and reason to support them. They are only false gods because their final conclusions are false. They hold us in false prisons because they are only partial truths.

Do we really believe in a loving God – an omnipotent, all-powerful Creator – who has designed this world to keep us enslaved to our foibles and complexes? You were born in the slums of Quincy, Illinois, to parents who ensure that your life will be forever blighted – and therefore you will never know your true Parent, or the Christ who frees and leads

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you into your true and eternal identity and destiny? You were abused by your uncle or lied to by your mother – so you can never really love or be loved? That is the real truth, and the Apostle Paul is just delusional?

*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” (Galatians 1:4)*

*“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)*

That is from one end of Galatians to the other. And in the middle, Paul is saying that he does not believe in the other, lesser gods, but trusts in Jesus Christ. But of course, *we* are enlightened, so we can go on believing in all the other gods and still come out okay – even if we do have to keep carrying all our guilt, fear, complexes, and crippling experiences with us.

We are – or at least I suspect that most of us are – happy for our new freedom and our new beginnings. Despite occasional glitches, we really do know that our future will be better than our past, however good or bad the past has been. What kind of God can keep promising us a better and better future? Is there no end, no limit to it? No wonder some people are suspicious that we are just making it up – some grand version of wishful thinking. But they do not realize that the promises come from behind a Cross, and because of a Resurrection. Our Lord is the One to go to for new beginnings. In fact, our Faith is almost too full of newness – too risky and exciting. And always I end up realizing that true Life is never my idea, never my wishful thinking. God keeps initiating the possibilities and inviting me in, and sadly I am always ducking and dodging – at least for a while.

May I ask again: What are you really expecting as this year unfolds? Same old thing with perhaps a few wrinkles and variations thrown in? Perhaps. More and more, the evidence is mounting that, to some degree at least, people get what they expect. Isn't that scary? And you cannot just expect any old thing you want to. You do know that, right? Expectation is not merely daydreaming. We end up expecting according to what we really believe. And believing is the complex result of all of our experience and awareness in life so far. To change our expectations, we have to change our whole way of believing and living. We cannot just suddenly

“up and change our expectations” any time we want or in any way we wish. What we trust, what we count on, what we focus on, and what we eliminate from our lives are all intricately mixed up with our genuine expectations. Wanting something, no matter how hard or how long I go on wanting it, will never turn into an expectation. True expectation aligns our lives to the things we expect. That is why living in a prophetic tradition is so much more powerful than many people realize.

Jesus does not come out of nowhere. Jesus is born of a two-thousand-year-old prophetic tradition. There is no way to comprehend His New Covenant if we do not see Him as fulfillment of the Old Covenant. And He is saying so in this morning’s passage. We have a new generation of religious leaders saying to us, “I don’t know anything, and nobody else knows anything either. But I like babies, and that’s how we come to know God.” Some of them say this with the Covenants as the foundation in the background, but they don’t always mention that. They are trying to talk about a relational God, revealed in Jesus Christ, but they are sick of the abuses and play-acting of some of today’s religious enterprises. Jesus was pretty sick of them in His own time too. But you have to listen very carefully to pick up The WORD behind the baby’s smiles. And that is leading many down empty roads.

The Bible carries and preserves within it some patterns and themes that give it more authority and promise than we can fathom. Sometimes we speak of “The WORD” and feel the power flowing over and around us. The *logos* of God is never an idle or imaginary thing. If I speak a word, it may be just idle chit-chat. If God speaks a word, it will come to be.

In any case, asking “What do you expect?” asks for a summation of your entire philosophical and theological stance in life up to this present moment. It is possible to change our expectations, but seldom do they change dramatically or quickly. Never do they change genuinely – unless we have been changed on the inside. There is so much weight and time and experience behind our true expectations that when our expectations *do* change dramatically and quickly, there is always some kind of powerful conversion experience behind it. That is, to change our expectations very much, some experience powerful enough to outweigh years of normal experience must occur. We often call them “crises.” We normally describe them as traumatic.

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Suppose, for instance, that someone we really believed in came to us today and said: “Do not worry about your livelihood. Stop worrying about whether you will have enough food or drink or clothing. You must be through with worrying about tomorrow. Instead, seek God’s Kingdom first – seek God’s kingship over and beyond your own life. Also, if you learn to ask anything in my name, it will actually come into your life – because God already loves you. I tell you these things that you may find true peace. You will encounter suffering in this world, but take courage – I have overcome the world!”

How would you like to live through this year actually believing that – being absolutely sure that Jesus’ word was good? Would that change your expectations any? Boy oh boy! If it had been anybody else but Jesus, I would know he was nuts – completely crazy. Just hearing those few words from Jesus and instantly I know there is a terrific war going on inside me – a war between my normal expectations and what Jesus tells me to expect. Any time I get anywhere close to Jesus, I can feel this war starting up again, and I have to fight hard to hang on to my well-honed, tried-and-true negatives. I mean, I know Jesus had a really hard life, but He just doesn’t seem to understand that life can be difficult and dangerous here, or that we should be careful, cautious, fearful, and worried all the time.

Listening to Jesus, for instance, makes me ashamed of the way I sometimes worry about the church. I don’t mean just *The New Church*. I mean it worries me a lot that the Christian church in our time seems so weak, dumb, and wrong in so many ways, and that it has lost so much influence and credibility in the society of our time. Usually I figure I have some good reasons for this worry. But then, we always think we have good reasons for our worry. So that’s not a good enough excuse. It’s just the same old sin of putting faith in the wrong place. What do I really believe? It is His church. If He likes it, He will keep it. If not, it doesn’t matter anyway. No power on earth can maintain the Christian church if Jesus deserts it. No power on earth can destroy the Christian church if Jesus decides to preserve it. What do we expect if we are faithful people? What can we expect if we are only pretending?

What a total reversal of expectations there is in the presence of Jesus: A God who knows our needs. A God who cares. A God who communicates. A God we can trust to provide. Can you imagine your own soul relaxing, breathing a great sigh of relief, smiling even? I can

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see that you fight it too. It shows on your faces. But I was talking about *supposing* we believed in Him! I said just suppose, just imagine ...

Is it possible to imagine Jesus' words seeping into us, filling us until we really are at peace – until we can spend ourselves joyfully, without tension or grimness, without pride or fear? “*Will he not clothe you, O ye of little faith?*” That means “How little trust we really place in Him.” Ouch! Sorry, Lord.

Goodness! What an attitude and perspective He tries to bring to us. It is so beautiful that it burns us with a strange longing to be and live that way. But with the portents of so many possible crises – with poverty and disease and a whole world moaning and crying out desperately with its unfulfilled needs – how can we believe that our needs will be filled? And if our needs are filled, will it not just make us feel all the more guilty because of all the others whose needs are *not* filled? What do we expect this year? Certainly not the kind of faith Jesus was talking about.

But it was such a pleasant oasis, such a happy mirage. I hate to leave the imaginary place so quickly, don't you? Couldn't we stay just a moment longer before we return to our running with the heathen? There is no alternative, you know. It is either life with Jesus, or running with the unbelievers – the secular. Half of both is neither. “*Will he not clothe you?*” What if He really will? Not every oasis is a mirage. Besides, a person gets tired of running. Especially when they are as old as I am. Let us rest a bit longer and look at the beautiful image behind the words.

Do you see how it changes as the light shifts? A minute ago it looked like birds in the sky and wildflowers growing, and all that seemed to matter was physical serenity and security. And now all the shades and hues are changing. “*Will he not provide much more [even better] for you?*” More than for the flowers and more than for the birds! “*Clothed with power from on high.*” Clothed in immortality. “*Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*” (II Corinthians 5:4) “*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed ...*” Excuse me, what did we say we were expecting?

His Message is from a different dimension. These are the same words we have heard many times before, only we are forever deserting the oasis before spending enough time to look around. We do not give our eyes a chance to adjust to the new light. We come out of the desert

at a dead run, anxiety and legitimate concerns and worries, and perhaps some logical cynicism, dripping from us. We take a fast look at Jesus and His Message and, seeing that He has it all backwards, we take off running again.

And it is backwards – just exactly backwards. A person is *supposed* to apply a short-range faith to a long-range earthly future. Everybody knows that. We have always done it that way. We look to God for abundance *now*, so we can plan our own futures and feel secure. (And the more God does not seem to do that for us, the more we run with the unbelievers.)

Jesus gets it all mixed up and backwards. He applies a long-range faith to living one day at a time here. He asks for spiritual gifts of faith for the moment, so He can be free enough and secure enough to let God plan the future. You think I am exaggerating? “*Seek first the kingdom of God, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides.*”

Can you imagine what would happen to us – what would become of our homes, our businesses, our grade-point averages, and our budgets – if we went around thinking all the time about God’s kingship over us, about his way of holiness? At first glance, my mind says they all would be lost – our homes and jobs and security. At second glance, there is that strange inner smile: What if it turned such things into what we have always really wanted and hoped they would be? At third glance, I start to lose it again. How could we even imagine it – all of us actually thinking and living that way? It would certainly be a strange and incredibly different year, though!

Yes, but look at the difference between what Jesus expected and what *we* ordinarily expect. Jesus expected prayers to be answered ... people to be healed ... God alive and active everywhere. He even expected resurrection. Yes, He did! He quailed at the coming crucifixion, which was terribly real. But He already believed in the third day, and had already said so. And we expect ... what? What is your most exciting expectation for the coming year?

We are practical and realistic, aren’t we? We like to see results, see things accomplished, feel like something is happening. And the oasis of faith is so theoretical, futurized, idealistic, and impractical. We do not want to just sit around “believing” and “expecting” – we want to “do” something. Only, putting our trust in Him is what gets it done.

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That is the strange, *unearthly* truth. Behold the man who did it backwards and got it done. Compare Him to the practical realists who do it the usual way: working so hard and expecting the worst, and frequently getting it or even creating it (the worst, that is).

Consider the theoretical, impractical, irrelevant, unrealistic, backwards way of Jesus: Who talked to people about God's Kingdom, shattering their guilt and giving them something to live FOR. Who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and calmed their inner storms. Who made rich men generous, lonely men joyous, and timid men courageous. Who redeemed a thousand years of hide-bound tradition, changed the world's history, and broke the power of the Prince of Darkness on a day of blood and murder that all the gods of death and destruction could not make stick. One strange carpenter, from His knees, doing it all backwards – putting God first.

No, you can't do it that way – it won't work that way, we say ... we think ... we think we know. We *know*? We are sure. Why are we so sure?

*“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” “Will he not clothe you, O ye of little faith?”*

With His whole life and death and resurrection as collateral, Jesus opened up a new WAY for us. It is still open. He still beckons. And I believe that more and more of us long to follow Him into His “backwards” Way.

Well, here I am, rambling on about this and that, when we should be considering our expectations. I hope you came here to do that, in the presence of God, finding New Life in Christ Jesus. Maybe some of us are even willing to allow our expectations to be changed.

What do you *expect*? God to be with you no matter what happens – no matter where you go, what you do, or what is going on around you? The Holy Spirit guiding your life on a daily basis – helping you with all the choices and tasks and decisions you face? Will God not clothe you, if you allow it – if you believe and ask? What do you expect from Jesus Christ? Miracles? Salvation? Strength and patience? Transformation? Change from within? Isn't that why He came?