

Great Expectations

2- Life Is a Miracle

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

John 4: 43-54

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Ash Wednesday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

I'm not sure "Great Expectations" are exactly what most of us think of when we come to Ash Wednesday. It is a stark day. A somber day. A sober day, at the beginning of a season of penitence and reflection. "Blow the trumpet in Zion." "Sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people, return to the Lord with all your heart," says Joel. We Presbyterians have not always made much of the day. In fact, part of our history is we had such an "if the Catholics do it we don't" attitude that we pretty well neglected it altogether.

Yet in terms of the grand cycle of what this day begins, forty days of preparation for Easter, corresponding with Jesus' forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness as he begins his three years of public ministry, then that final journey Jesus makes to Jerusalem and the confrontations he will have there, all leading to his death on a cross and his rising on the third day, then yes this Ash Wednesday begins for us a season of profoundly great expectations.

What do you expect from it? More generally, not only Lent, but from life itself? What do you expect God to do in your life as you face challenges at work, struggles in your relationships, diagnoses that threaten your health? Where do you find God in all this? What do you expect God to do for you and for this world?

Philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain, a distinguished professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago rather bluntly, in an essay entitled "Who Are We?" describes us.

"Who, then are we, we prideful late-twentieth-century creatures? Lord knows, we no longer think of ourselves as *belonging* to anyone or anything. We do not belong – we own; we possess. And that, to say the least, is not the same thing. We plunge into self-aggrandizement convinced that the dazzling success of our projects will prove definitely who we are. But this fails to satisfy. Our triumphs ring hollow. Our victories so often turn to ashes in our mouths. But never mind. Tomorrow we will run faster, climb higher, and one fine morning... Who are we? We are creatures who have forgotten what it means to be faithful to something other than ourselves."ⁱ

I

And then comes Lent, and it's beginning on Ash Wednesday, and the call to slam on the brakes, sober up, get off the merry-go-round, repent, reflect on our lives and their

passing as grass of the field. Repent and reflect more deeply on our relation to God. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord abides forever,” we say every Sunday. Who are we really? Simply cosmeticized fleshly creatures that float from Ground Hogs Day, to Super Bowl Sunday to Valentine’s Day?

Ash Wednesday and Lent invite us to move deeper. Move deeper in the midst of a culture that urges us otherwise, recognize we are needy creatures who are recipients of grace; incredibly good news, the news that God is, God loves, indeed love so much that God sends a part of his own inner being outward, the Savior who loves us all the way along his heartening, and horrendous journey into the heart of evil.

II

The reading from John’s Gospel brings us back to Cana the same small village where we were a few weeks ago in a very different setting. Then it was a wedding and Jesus turned water into wine and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him. That was, John tells us, the first of his signs. Now again in Cana, Jesus has, since that wedding, been down into Samaria and the Judean wilderness, down to Jerusalem, where he demonstrates who he is through more miraculous signs. The crowds are growing. The people impressed. Word is getting around. Great expectations are rising wherever Jesus appears.

The setting is Cana again. Some details are like his first miracle at the wedding. Lest we miss the significance, John tells us, Jesus comes to “Cana in Galilee, where he had changed the water into wine.” Pay attention to the details, John says. God is in the details. That miracle took place on the highly symbolic Third Day. Again we are on another Third Day, although John says it less directly this time, “When the two days were over,”ⁱⁱ Jesus is back again in his home territory, local boy done well. And “the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival.”ⁱⁱⁱ He has come home again with a champion’s hip ring. This time, in Cana however, the mood is altogether different.

Suddenly he is encountered by a royal official from Capernaum, an important member of King Herod’s court most likely, who has come this distance to seek out Jesus in Cana and plead for his son. “When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.”^{iv}

Jesus’ initial response to him is surprisingly harsh, academic, unfeeling. Jesus warns the man about seeking for miracles. “Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.’” Apparently Jesus has become something of a rock star down in Jerusalem, with all his signs and wonders, and he decides now is the time to express a theological corrective to this desperate father.

But the man is in no mood for such scolding. This is no college bull session. This is life and death for his son. His son lies dying, and the man is desperately looking

for help, and still presses Jesus, still believes Jesus is able to provide all the boy needs. “Sir come down before my little boy dies.”

Ah now we have come to Ash Wednesday. Not Mardi Gras but Lent. Not a wedding party but a funeral looms, if something miraculous is not done. The official senses implicitly that Jesus is able to do what is needed.

Catching the man’s tone, Jesus says simply, “Go; your son will live.”^v At the word of Jesus, the man goes. That is it. No begging Jesus to accompany him home any more. Jesus’ word is all he needs. Nothing more passes between them. Simply this: Jesus speaks and promises life to the boy. The man goes trusting, the word of Jesus.

Next day as the man is approaching his home of Capernaum down along the Sea of Galilee he is met by his servants with the wonderful news that his child is alive and began to recover yesterday. At 1:00, says the New Revised Standard Version Bible, the very hour Jesus spoke to him. The older Revised Standard Version Bible and most other translations say the child began to recover “yesterday at the seventh hour.” That is better.

Seventh hour. Third day. Forty days of preparation, lots of symbolism and signs in John. So today, when we come to ask God to open us afresh to his presence, to forgive our sins, and help us over these 40 days to

“observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence,
by prayer and fasting, by works of love,
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God”^{vi}

we are asking God who still meets us in our lives, in our world, to come and show us the ways we need to be reoriented.

III

We come before God on Ash Wednesday humbly, honestly, confessing our sins and asking God to forgive us and make such time as is ours, whether forty days, or forty hours, or forty and forty years, to take all this and shape it, so that we may enter into it, and live through it - believing.

The nobleman, probing the time his son began to get better, discovers it was the very hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live”. And hearing this, the man himself comes to believe, together with his entire household. Again John specifies, “This was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.” Miracles happen. Water becomes wine. A boy good as dead is given life, and more, when Jesus is answered with belief.

What can these forty days be for you if you, if you will go home believing Jesus is able to work his miracles in your life, in your family, in your world? What can happen in us and between us if we seek not to possess but to be possessed by him?

Lee Cleveland's sister-in-law's sister, Denise was in Haiti with a Methodist Mission team at the moment of the earthquake. This is some of what she wrote about her harrowing experience,

“Danny and I are obsessed with thoughts of our experiences, and so sad that it's hard to talk. As I sat on my bed around 4:50 PM, cleaned up, waiting for Danny to come so we could go down to the orphans, I heard the loudest rumbling ever – as if thunder-booms were coming from underneath me. As I wondered (maybe a few nanoseconds) what the hell the noise was, several things happened at once: the large picture window in the room violently blew out, the cistern on the roof over my room fell over and tons and tons of water was shooting down from the roof past the now open window, the room sunk so low on one side that the bunk beds went zooming across the room towards that opening and then the side wall behind my bed fell off and outwards. I stood up and ran across the slanted floor towards the bedroom door which led to the living area only to find it was jammed shut. At that moment I knew that I was dead: I would be buried alive.”

“Just then I heard Danny screaming ‘Mom, Mom, Mom.’ ... He kept screaming as I continued to try to get the door open. Just then, he literally broke the door down, and saved me. He was such a hero! ... We ran out of the house through one of the walls that had fallen down... And Danny screamed, ‘The orphans!!’ Amazingly the orphanage was not destroyed, only cracked, and the children were alive.”

Psalm 130,

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!
 Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
 I wait for the Lord, and my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
 My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
 More than those who watch for the morning.
 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
 And with him is great power to redeem.
 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.”^{vii}

Denise cousin and her son Danny were spared in Haiti. Over 200,000 of course were not. The earth reeled. The rocks shattered. Lives were snuffed out. Yet God, who wishes that none be lost, that none perish, was and is in the midst of that horror for good. This we believe. On Ash Wednesday and in Lent we are not delivered from the suffering of the world. But rather asking God to come and work through us in the midst of it. “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.” On Ash Wednesday we get off the merry-go-round, turn and face our God, with our need for repentance, our need to hear God's word to us, “Go your son will live,” and hearing – believe. At Cana Jesus gives us yet a second sign.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”^{viii} Amen.

ⁱ Jean Bethke Elshtain, Who Are We?, p.4

ⁱⁱ John 4:43.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 4:45.

^{iv} John 4:47.

^v John 4:50.

^{vi} Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, p. 223.

^{vii} Psalm 130.

^{viii} John 20:31.