

Looking to Lent: Facing Expectations

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael –April 6 2025

5th Sunday in Lent

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3,11b-32 NRSVUE

Reflection: Micah 6:6-8

Call to Worship: Lord, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste! Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts. Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!
(Psalm 126)

Prayer: Everlasting God, we thank you for the tender mercy you show to all people. We are thankful that you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to be of our flesh, and to suffer death on a cross, that all could see and follow the example of his great humility. Help us to overcome the many difficulties that we face in this life. May you always strengthen us by your Holy Spirit that we may understand and face the expectations that we see and have put upon us. Mercifully grant that we can follow the example of patience and love shown to us in Jesus. May we embrace his resurrection that we may know life and have it abundantly. Heavenly Father, watch over us in worship this day. Guide us in singing and prayer by your Spirit. And help us to gather in the peace and the love of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Micah 6:6-8

⁶ “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8 NRSVUE)*

We read the words of Micah and we hear of what God expects. We also hear of what it is we think God expects. But God does not seem to want the things we want to offer. Instead, we are reminded that God wants us to be humble, to do justice, and to love kindness. That we are called to follow God by emulating God’s behavior. How can we act more like Christ in this life? How can we model Christ to others in our own actions? Who can you be lifting up in prayer this week? How will you continue to face your problems this Lent? How can we work together to face them in Christ?

Prayer: Merciful God, we seek your presence with us in this place. We know you are with us in the good and the bad and the unknown. Help us through the easy and the difficult, for we know that your Holy Spirit is our guide and teacher in all circumstances. Today we ask you to help us to face expectations, knowing that we can miss what you are doing because of them. May these forty days be a time of reflection so that we may mend our ways and turn our faces to you, O God. We lift up our prayers to you on this day, knowing that you are always more ready to listen than we are to speak. We lift up the prayers that we voice together and the prayers we

keep deep within our hearts. May you guide us, lead us, and strengthen us so that we can face whatever tomorrow may bring. May we remember you in our mourning and our dancing. May we find you in our weeping and our laughter. And may we always remember that whatever we face, we always face it together with your steadfast love and faithfulness. Bless us and keep us that we may walk in the ways of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 43, verse 16 through 21.

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down; they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. (Isaiah 43:16-21 NRSVUE)*

Our next reading is from Philippians chapter 3, verse 4b through 14.

^{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:4b-14 NRSVUE)*

Our final reading is from John chapter 12, verse 1 through 8.

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray

him), said, ⁵ “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (John 12:1-8 NRSVUE)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This last message in our Looking to Lent series is Facing Expectations, and this week we look at the way our expectations can change our outlook. What we expect from others, what others expect from us, and what we may expect from God all play a part in how we respond to things around us, and they can cause us to lose sight of what's happening around us. This happens when we are not seeing things as they are, but seeing what we expect to see. Our expectations can cause us to think that people should be doing much more than they are. Expectations can cause us to feel like we are failing. And our expectations of God can make us miss what God is doing, because we are only looking for what we expected God to be doing. All of these are issues that we have to deal with. In many ways, Lent is about subverting our expectations, because the crucifixion goes against anything that would have been expected. The resurrection also goes against what would be expected. They are both lessons in the ways that our expectations may not match what reality.

Our first reading today is from Isaiah, and here we have an expectation about God. God is imploring people not to consider the things of old, because he's doing something new. I was thinking about this one, because in honesty, it is easy for us to not see something new, because we're expecting something old. It is easy for us to miss what God may be doing today, because we're so busy thinking that God is going to do the same thing God did yesterday. It's easy for us to miss what's happening if all we look for is what we expect to happen. And this is a problem because of the fact that God is always going to be doing something new. If we think about the way that God upends what we expect from society, we should always expect God to do the unexpected. But our expectations too often line up with what we want God to do, not what God is doing. But here we hear that God is doing something new, putting rivers in the desert, making a way in the wilderness, doing the unexpected. Making a path where there should be no path, having a stream where there should be no water. That God is going to do what we may not expect, because God is going to do whatever it is his people need. This can throw us off if we are not expecting God to have this kind of radical love for his people. This often happens when we don't share in that radical love. When we do not expect God to go above and beyond, it is often because we are not willing to go above and beyond.

Paul talks about how we can subvert that. Paul talks about how he's got every reason to be confident in the flesh. He is blameless, righteous under the law. He has been an excellent keeper of the law, a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church, and he did it all splendidly. But then his expectations were upended, and none of that mattered anymore. Paul shows us that when we allow our expectations to be upended, instead of fighting it and we adapt to it, we see the world differently and we expect something different. Paul regards everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ. He's willing to lose anything to gain in Christ, to count all of those things that people want to hold him in high regard for as nothing but loss because they are nothing without Christ. He is upending his own expectations and he's changing what he expects from others. Part of that is that he is looking at people through

Christ. He no longer sees any of his accomplishments as anything for him to be proud of because everything comes to him through Christ and in Christ. The power of the resurrection has upended all of his expectations, so he is changing how he sees the world. He wants to know the power of the resurrection. He wants to know that Christ conquers death to give life. It isn't that he's already got this. No, he feels it's something he's working towards. That he will continue to press on, moving forward, with his expectation being that Christ will be with him every step of the way. Not that he already has it, not that it is coming to him because of anything he has done, but he is seeking Christ in all that he is. His expectation is simply that he will follow. I think that's amazing because he gives up on this idea of self, this idea that everything he does is his. And his expectation changes and he becomes grace-focused. That he goes from righteousness under the law to faith in Christ, which means that he also doesn't see others as trying to be righteous in the law because he sees them by faith in Christ as well. His expectation for everyone changes so that he can love his neighbor, and he can love God.

When we look at our gospel reading, we see some expectations. Jesus is with Lazarus and Martha and Mary, and Mary wants to do something for Jesus. She anoints his feet with perfume. And I feel like Mary knows what's coming. She already has a greater blessing than she could ever believe. She knows her family has been blessed. So, she does something to honor her friend. But the expectation that we get is that this could have been used for something else. That this perfume could have been sold to raise money for the poor. And this kind of expectation is way too common. I can understand it and don't understand it all at the same time. What I mean by this is that we are called to be responsible with what we have, but it doesn't mean that we can't do good things with what we have. I think that's sometimes the expectation. I hear it in the simple things, and it helps us to relate to how this plays out in our faith life. I have heard that if young people want to save up money, they need to stop drinking their fancy coffee all the time because then they'll have money. And I'll be honest, periodically getting a three-dollar cup of coffee that's not going to let me buy a whole lot. Would it let me buy something? Yes. Would it also be ripping a piece of joy from someone's life? Yes. We might as well ask, "why do you send people birthday cards? You could have saved that money you were giving as a gift." And to that I say, but what about the joy it creates? What about the appreciation that it shows? What about the love that it sparks? I can attest to this. If you have ever given a child a five-dollar gift card to Dairy Queen, you know exactly what I mean. They are excited. They are overjoyed. They know they are loved. Now, somebody could expect that that money could go somewhere else, somewhere better. But I think maybe that joy is worth something as well.

Now, I bring this back into our gospel reading because I think it really is that simple sometimes. Yes, this perfume could have been used for something else. It could have been given to the poor. We could expect it to be used differently. But we would also be denying Mary of a way of saying thank you to Jesus. We would be denying her the opportunity to thank her friend for being her friend. We would deny her the chance to honor Christ because it could save a little bit of money. Sometimes our expectations cause us to not notice the obvious, and in this case, it would be that we're asking her to give up having an appreciation for Christ because that money could go somewhere else. Now, this doesn't mean we go to excess. If she did this every day, then I think we could note that she has a problem with dumping out expensive perfume. If you are spending twenty dollars a day on coffee, I think we might have to talk about the issue that you have. But I think sometimes we expect people to constantly give

up joy for responsibility. You know, when I think about Christ, I don't see him as somebody who would never want me to be happy, and I think that's something that we have to take into account. Does Christ expect us to have joy? I think so. Does God expect us to love one another? Yes. And how do we show that? With appreciation, with kindness, and yes, sometimes with our actions and our gifts. I think the problem that we quickly see is that if we expect people to never show joy, we cannot expect them to love. And if we can't expect them to love, we can't expect them to love their neighbor. And if people cannot find a way to love their neighbor, how will they ever love God? Mary is showing a kind of appreciation, and it's expected that she could have been more responsible. Instead, I think we need to say, what a wonderful way to show how much you love your friend.

I guess what I'm saying is that we need to expect others to treat us with grace so that we may treat others with grace as well. That we let our expectations be that we expect others to want to experience joy, to want to show appreciation. That we should expect others to show love. That we should expect new things. And that we should know that others may expect things of us that we can't deliver and that that is on them and not on us. That the expectation we should have is that we should love each other in Christ. That we should care for each other. That we should expect each other to have empathy and mercy and grace so that we may love. And I think if we can do that, then we will be surprised by joy, and we will be delighted by the love of the Lord. And when God does something new, that we may celebrate. And that we may celebrate with each other, and that we may celebrate in Christ. And God's people can say, Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Looking to Lent

This series is a 5-week series plus Ash Wednesday and in it we will be discussing the various issues we face in life. Lent is a time of reflection and letting go, and as such we will be reflecting on the mindsets we can leave behind this year. We will discuss what we give up and what we take up when we face doubts, temptation, adversity, presumptions, indignation, and expectations during Lent. As we look to lent, we are reminded that we face everything with Christ.

3/5: Facing Doubt

3/9: Facing Temptation

3/16: Facing Adversity

3/23: Facing Presumptions

3/30: Facing Indignation

4/6: Facing Expectations

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