

## Great Expectations

Sterling UMC  
November 27, 2011  
Mark 13:32-37

Ten-year old Phineas was up before the sun. He'd hardly slept the night before. This was to be the day he had waited for all of his life.

The year was 1820. And Phineas was about to see an island. His island. The island that had been promised to him at birth. The day he was born, his grandfather had presented newborn Phineas with a deed, a sizeable portion of land called Ivy Island. And today for the first time, Phineas was to see it.

He could scarcely sit still as he and his father climbed into the buggy and began the long anticipated journey. As they rounded each turn or got to the top of each hill he would ask, "Are we there yet? Can I see it from here?" And his father would encourage him to be patient and assure him they would be there soon.

Finally, his dad stopped the buggy and pointed north beyond a meadow to a row of tall trees.

"There," he said. "There is Ivy Island."

Phineas jumped from the wagon and ran as fast as his legs would carry him through the meadow, leaving his father far behind. He raced to the row of trees into an opening from which Ivy Island was visible.

When he saw the land he stopped. His heart sank.

Ivy Island was five acres of snake-infested marshland. His grandfather had called it the most valuable land in Connecticut. But it was worthless. His father told him it was a generous gift. It wasn't. It was a joke ... a cruel joke. As stunned Phineas stared in disbelief, his father roared with laughter.

Phineas didn't laugh. Nor did he forget. He had great expectations and they were crushed before his eyes by the cruelty of his father and grandfather. That disappointment shaped his life. He, the deceived, made a lifestyle out of deception. The little boy fooled made a career out of fooling people.

You see you don't know him as Phineas. You know him as P.T. You don't know him as a landowner, you know him as a promoter. You know him as the one who coined the phrase, "There's a sucker born every minute." He spent his life proving it. Such was the life of P.T. – P.T. Barnum.

And such is the life of many others, many others who have been told they'd be taken to the Promised Land only to find themselves taken to the swamp. Those who have expected the thrill of victory but instead have known only the agony of defeat. Those who started out with great expectations only to be bitterly disappointed.

All of us know a little bit about this. All of us at one time or another have known the pain of having great expectations only to have those expectations shattered by disappointment. It may not be to the same magnitude as what happened to young P.T. Barnum, but it happens just the same.

For example, you see previews for a new movie or television program. They build it up. They call it an incredible epic adventure. They say it is the best program of the year. They get you all excited and anxious to see this fantastic show, and then when it comes on it is the biggest flop you have ever seen.

Those of you who follow football can identify with this as well. The playoffs come and then the teams that will play in the Super Bowl are determined. For two weeks, they hype the game. They analyze the players, the coaches. They talk about every conceivable angle. They build your expectations and then Super Bowl Sunday comes and the game ends up being a one-sided blowout.

We even see this in our Scripture lesson this morning. We come expecting to hear about the birth of the Christ-child and instead we are confronted with an unexpected theme – the “end of time.” The Christmas spirit is all around us. And now, we have Scripture that speaks about the end when we are just beginning.

Sadly, the Advent Season can be just like that for many. It is a season of great expectations. It begins with great hope and promise as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ into our world. But along the way something happens. Before the Thanksgiving turkey has hardly had a chance to get cold, we start into this mad rush through the holiday season, frantically making preparation for that one special day of the year, Christmas Day. And just about everything we do begins to revolve around the preparations that must be made.

And before we know it our lives have become so busy and so cluttered, that our feeling of great expectations turns into merely desperate survival. There is shopping that must be done. Presents to wrap. Decorations to hang. Cookies to bake. Parties to attend. And before you can even blink an eye December 25<sup>th</sup> has arrived and, just like that it all over. And you feel such a letdown, such an empty feeling, your great expectations snuffed out by the crush of the season.

When you finally pause to catch your breath, you look back and say, “Where did the time go?” And when you finally get a chance to sit back and to reflect on things you realize that in the midst of all the preparations for the season, you have neglected the most important preparation of all, the preparation of your heart for the birth of the Savior. Your life becomes so cluttered and full that you have no room in your heart for the Lord. And when it’s all over you feel cheated. You feel you have been built up only to find out that it’s been some kind of cruel joke.

But thanks be to God, it doesn’t have to be that way. God does not play games with us like that. He does not build us up only to let us down. He does not raise our hopes, only to see them crushed. For Advent is the season of great expectations, and we have a God that follows through on his word.

Look at Mary, and how God worked unexpectedly in her life. Think about it. Joseph proposed and Mary said yes. Now, Mary was in planning mode. She began counting the days until she and Joseph would start a new life together. They shared their dream, hopes and great expectations. In the midst of their planning, life took a strange twist: Mary found out she was pregnant!

Imagine Mary. Her mental state must have been completely jumbled. She was unexpectedly expecting. None of this had gone according to plan or even according to reasonable expectations. Mary had been looking forward to marriage and the chance to set up a household with Joseph, and *then* maybe look forward to a baby. But now, everything was happening at once. Mary also had to cope with those strange visits from angels, and the stunning news about the identity of this baby. It was an outrageous time in her life. Events and emotions were swirling around her in a cloud of confusion. Yet in the midst of chaos, Mary responded with incredible faith. She opened herself to unexpected divine presence in the midst of the chaos. And God delivered. He made good on his promises. God took Mary, an ordinary young woman who was expecting one thing and her life became extraordinary as he gave her some infinitely greater than she ever expected.

And friends that is God's message for us this Advent season. God makes good on his promises. He exceeds our expectations. He always has, and he always will. Our greatest expectations are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ. In that tiny baby, lying in the manger in Bethlehem as the beautiful hymn says it, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

You see the problem is not with God, it is with us. It is not God failing to meet our expectations; it is in our failure to prepare. The problem is that we allow ourselves to be robbed of those great expectations by our own neglect. You see we must refocus. It is so easy to become distracted and lose sight of the real purpose behind all of the things that we do and all the preparations we make during this time of year.

Now don't get me wrong, there is not anything inherently wrong with many of these things. Some of them are even good things. It is just that sometimes we settle for second best. We hold on to the good things when we could have had the best. We get so preoccupied with all the other things that our lives become so busy and cluttered that when the Christ-child knocks on our door we just don't have room, and we miss his coming.

But the Advent gives us the opportunity to change all that. It comes every year with its message of hope, and joy, and great expectation, and tells us to be prepared; to be alert, to be ready, to make room for the baby.

I would like to make a few suggestions this morning, that as we begin this Advent season, we help us to truly make it a season of great expectations.

First, examine your priorities. Sort through some of the things that you fill your life with and decide where your priorities lie. So often we fill our lives with so much junk and things that are of so little ultimate significance. Ask yourself, "What is it I truly value? What are my priorities? What takes first place in my life?" We must sort through all the junk and clutter and get rid of anything that would hinder us from truly receiving Christ. When you seriously take the time to do this and to ponder what a loving, gracious, and merciful thing God has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, then suddenly the things that we once felt were so important lose their significance.

Secondly, cleanse your heart and soul of anything that would contaminate, pollute, or corrupt your heart. How do we do this? We do it through confession

and repentance. David pleaded with the Lord, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Christ cannot come into a dirty heart.

Confession of sin is an acknowledgement that you have fallen short of God's perfect will for your life, that there is something wrong, that you do need help. Only true and authentic confession is what makes our hearts truly open and receptive. It cleans the soul so that we may receive the Christ child.

Finally, open your hearts and accept his presence into your life. Open the door to your heart and receive this great gift from God. You can have made all the preparations but until you open your heart you cannot receive him. You have to open the doors of your heart and receive him afresh and anew. Once you do that then a whole new life begins. Your life is never the same again. "Old things pass away, behold, all things become new."

Don't let this Christmas season come and go and leave you wondering what happened. Don't let this season come and go and leave you unfulfilled. This is truly a season of great expectations. We are expecting a child, and this is no ordinary child. The angel said to Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Great Expectations. God has done his part. Will you do your part?