

EXPECT THE BEST
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9
DECEMBER 22, 1985

How did you get out of bed today? In what frame of mind did you get out of bed? How do you begin each day? Do you begin each day with a sense of dread, or boredom, or fatalism (if anything can go wrong today, I know it will happen to me!), or do you begin each day with a sense of expectancy? Did you come to church today expecting something to happen? Something wonderful! Take a chance, exert a little faith this morning. Expect the best!

This is Advent, a time of waiting, a time of expecting. The Advent stance is to expect the best. Don't complain about what you have or don't have. Don't expect trouble or disappointment, but expect the best. Last night at the Fireside Fellowship Christmas potluck, Annie Newlands brought steak knives. Now, that's faith! Taking steak knives to a potluck is expecting the best!

The good news is that God sent the best. God had a problem. The world had gone wrong, taken a wrong turn. Humans seemed intent on destroying not only God's creation, not only the water, soil and air; but humans seemed intent on destroying themselves. Humans seem to be fascinated by weapons, committed to vengeance and violence. God had a problem. What to do?

God's first plan was to call Abraham and create a people, create a nation that would live out his will for humankind, a people who would take the laws of life seriously and live them out on behalf of the world. The plan ran into all kinds of problems. The people, happy enough to be God's people when things went their way, had difficulty sticking to the plan. God sent prophets from time to time to call them back to the plan.

Finally, the situation grew so desperate that God sent the very best. God came himself, gave himself to the world, came as a human, born as a baby. God came as a mighty prophet to preach and teach. But God in the flesh was more than a prophet. He was the Messiah, the Son, the Savior, who embodied all the dreams that God has for humankind. Jesus came to save the world, to take upon himself the sin of humankind, to show the world by his life what is God's plan, to love all people with the love which brought the creation into being, the love which transforms lives. Such a plan!

Christ then called a people to carry on his work; namely, the church—you and me. God sent the best, and Jesus the Christ calls you and me to participate in the best. God calls us to expect the best and to be the best.

Turn your life around this advent. Quit focusing on things that perish, quit seeking things that rust and erode and disappoint. Quit expecting the worst, or the mediocre. Expect the best.

Expect to meet Christ this Christmas. Live each day in the expectation that Christ will come to you this Christmas, that Christ will come into your life, that Jesus will touch you with his healing power, that he will love you with his full heart, that he will laugh with you, feast with you, cry with

you, share your sorrow, share your joy. Expect God to speak to you, lead you, guide you, pick you up when you fall, wipe the tears, and embrace you when you are lonely. Expect the best.

You will be surprised what God can do. God can work miracles in lives. God can take the barest of minimums and transform them into beautiful treasures. There's an old story in Mexico about a little girl called Pepita who wanted nothing in the world more than to present the Christ child with a beautiful gift on Christmas Eve. But Pepita was very poor. She felt she had nothing to give. Her cousin, slightly older and wiser, told her that no gift was too humble. If Pepita gave the gift with love, the Christ child would be pleased. So Pepita stooped beside the road on the way to church, gathered a bunch of brightly colored weeds growing there, and placed them on the altar.

An 11-year old German boy whose parents had immigrated to Hollywood heard the story and was impressed. He discovered that the weed grew well in the southern California climate. Fourteen years later he was the first person to develop a variety of the weed that could be grown successfully indoors. By then, his vision of the plant as a Christmas symbol was firmly in place. Paul Ecke, who now is 90 years old, takes credit for making the poinsettia a symbol of Christmas. A weed is now a symbol of God's best.

God can take weeds and transform them into plants of beauty. God can take people and transform their lives. Some people, on the one hand, consider themselves adequate. They have little need for God. They overlook the weeds in their lives. On the other hand, there are those people who feel their lives are overgrown with weeds. They feel there is not much God or anyone can do. They have given up. But, God can take people who think they are nothing but weeds and transform them into beautiful flowers. Expect the best.

Look for those qualities Paul described in the Epistle lesson this morning. Fill your mind with "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Surround yourself with beauty, not ugliness; with grace, not cheapness; with excellence, not with mediocrity.

A merchant, hearing that the natives of a South Sea island had more gold than they knew what to do with, decided to help them out and so he sailed to the island with a boatload of onions. The natives, never having tasted onions, were so delighted with the new delicacy that they exchanged a shipload of gold for them. The merchant's business rival decided that if the natives liked onions they would like garlic even more. (He was probably from Gilroy!) He visited the island with a shipload of garlic, and sure enough, they were delighted. When he asked for gold in return, he was informed that they would not consider giving him anything so commonplace, and they, therefore, turned over to him their most prized possession--a shipload of onions.

How often our gold turns into onions. We settle for less than the best. Don't settle for spoiled fruit such as money, pleasure, or worldly acclaim, in place of those true values which endure and which also give enduring satisfaction. Don't fill your mind with clutter or trash; but fill your mind with "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious." Be positive, hopeful, expectant. Expect the best. Act in such a manner that the best may happen.

Otherwise, if you fill your mind with trash, settle for less than pure motives, and try to take advantage of other persons, your dreams of gold will become shiploads of onions.

Be your best. As God gives the best, be your best, for God's sake, not for your own glory. After a pastor had made an appeal for a worthy cause, a woman member of the church came to the pastor, handed him a check for \$50, and asked him, "Is my gift satisfactory?" The pastor immediately replied, "If it represents you." He was wise, wasn't he? I'm afraid I would have answered, "Whatever you think." However, from now on, I've got an answer! There was a moment of soul-searching thought and the woman asked to have the check returned. A few days later she returned with a check for \$5,000 and again asked, "Is my gift satisfactory?" Again the pastor answered, "If it represents you." After a few moments of hesitation she took back the check and left. Later in the week she came again with a check. This time the check was for \$50,000. As she placed it in the pastor's hand she said, "After earnest, prayerful thought, I have come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me, and I am happy to give it." Expect the best and be your best.

What is the best you can be? In response to God's gift of salvation, in response to God's best gift to you, what is the best you can be? Paul, a college student, received a new automobile from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve, Paul saw a boy admiring his car. The boy, obviously poor, was enchanted with the car. He asked, "Is this your car, mister?" Paul nodded, "My brother gave it to me for Christmas." The boy was astonished, "Wow! You mean your brother gave this car to you, and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish..." Then he hesitated and choked up. Paul was sure that the boy was going to wish that he had a brother like Paul's; but what the boy said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels. For the boy said "I wish that I could be a brother like that."

Paul looked at the boy in astonishment, then impulsively asked, "Would you like to ride in my automobile?" "Oh, yes, I'd love that!" After a short ride the boy turned with his eyes aglow and asked, "Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?" Paul smiled a little. He thought the boy wanted to show off in front of the neighbors. But Paul was wrong again. "Will you stop right where those two steps are?" asked the boy. Then he ran up the steps.

In a little while he returned, carrying his little polio-crippled brother. He sat him down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against him and pointed to the car. "There she is, Buddy, just like I told you. His brother gave it to him, and it didn't cost him a cent. And someday I'm gonna give you a car just like it. Then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I've been trying to tell you about."

Paul got out and lifted the little lad to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride. That Christmas Eve, Paul learned about being a brother and not just having a brother.

Do you expect this Christmas to be the best you have ever experienced? Expect to meet Christ. Turn from the weeds which have filled your life and turn to Christ. Accept God's best gift, the gift of a new life in Christ. Expect the best. Fill your mind with beauty and your actions with love. Be

EXPECT THE BEST

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 22, 1985

the best. Be a brother, rather than wishing for a brother. Be a friend, rather than wishing for a friend. Be a neighbor, rather than wishing for a neighbor. Do something for someone else and do it anonymously. Find someone who is lonely, sick, discouraged. Bake something, give a card, do something kind. Do something for God's work. Make an offering that represents you.

This will be a wonderful Christmas! Expect the best!