

## **“God’s Expectations” based on John 14:1-14 and Psalm 27**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Youth Sunday, May 7, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

The world of the novel and film series Harry Potter revolves around expectations. In the story, a powerful dark wizard wants to be immortal. He wants to escape his own death and then rule over others using death, his greatest fear, as his greatest power.

So, when it was prophesied that the newborn Harry would vanquish him, this wizard Voldemort goes to kill the infant Harry, but the child’s parents stand up to the wizard, unafraid to die. They sacrifice their own lives out of love for their son. And so, when Voldemort tries to kill the child, his killing curse bounces back and kills him, or at least it destroys his physical body.

Eleven years later, when Harry Potter arrives at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Everyone was talking about him, while he had only just learned that he was a wizard. Voldemort’s movement had gone into hiding. His supporters deserted him. Yet there was still a fear among the people that he might return. As such, Harry was seen as a child of prophecy, a savior. He was the one who had defeated the mighty dark lord before. The people around Harry had many expectations, wondering who is this child among them, wondering who he will become, and what this means for them.

What drives the plot of the novels and the movies, are these expectations, always present, as Voldemort seeks to regain power, restore his life, and in the process kill Harry. Along the way, the expectations about Harry’s ability to vanquish the dark lord create much disappointment and resentment, and even intense anger. There are those who want Voldemort restored to power that are bothered by Harry. Then there are those who want to see him vanquished once and for all, who are disappointed in Harry.

Many expect him to have great magical powers, but he’s only learning and so they doubt him because he isn’t who they thought he would be. Likewise, his age and lack of great power also frustrate Voldemort and his allies, since he should be easy to destroy, yet they fail to do so, time and time again. Harry instead, slowly discovers who he is, what he is capable of doing, and he becomes the person he was meant to be, willing to face the consequences, even death.

I think these expectations are a big part of what resonates with young people and us adults also. One of the things that set us apart as human beings is our ability to set expectations, our ability to formulate strong beliefs about the future in many ways, far beyond that of a squirrel storing nuts for the winter. We are unique in our ability and desire to look forward, and impose our beliefs about the future to shape our world. We want to change ourselves and others, and even God into images we’ve created, for who we are, who others are, and who we think God really is.

We have a tremendous group of young people in our youth group, all with so much potential. It is hard not to have expectations about who they are, who they will become, and what they will mean for us, as we get older, and they grow into more and more roles in leadership. But if we look to our scriptures today, we can see a word of caution for us, they remind us of the only expectation that matters – God with us.

Much like the Harry Potter series, our two readings today revolve around expectations. Both texts speak to us directly about God’s expectations for us, but the gospel is a warning about our own

expectations for ourselves. But the gospel is a warning about how our own expectations, can affect how we read and interpret a text, changing its meaning. Sometimes this can create disappointment and resentment, even anger and distance, instead of a relationship with Christ.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, or literally, “shaken” is what Jesus says to his disciples. Indeed, he promises that in the Father’s house, there are many mansions. Our translation today, comes from the New King James Version, which, like the original King James, translates the Greek word, “monai,” as mansion. This word means a dwelling place, coming from the verb, “to stay.” For those influenced by the Philosopher Plato, the word indicates a permanent place to stay in another world, be it heaven. But in other writings, including among Christians, it is a temporary place, a lodging, like a room in a hostel.

So, if the word means a lodging place, be it temporary or permanent, it’s a room just the same. How in the world, we might ask, did the translators of the King James come up with mansion? In a word, the answer is “expectations.” You see, mansion originally meant room. It came from the Latin word, “manere,” meaning “to stay,” just like in Greek. It was used for a temporary dwelling place, a lodging along the way.

In the English of the King James Bible, it had two meanings, the first being a simple lodging, a temporary room, but for the aristocracy, it was a second home, away from the manor house of the estate, or away from the Lord’s castle, and always more modest than either.

So, mansion was a perfectly fine translation in 1615 when the King James was completed. Yet, expectations read into this very verse seem to have changed the word’s meaning in English. After all, if Jesus is preparing to give us mansions in the Father’s house, then surely, these mansions will be greater than any estate’s manor house, far greater than any castle of the ruling elites around us. It will a large and impressive home with all the rooms we could want, and bathrooms, maybe even with bidets and every amenity that we could possibly imagine. And so, because of expectations, a word meaning a simple temporary room came to mean the Barbie Dream House.

You see, that’s not what the early church readers would have thought of when reading this passage. It was not the promise of a massive permanent home to meet all our earthly dreams, but the promise of a groom to his bride, that he will prepare a place for them – and so, for you.

It is a place to stay on the father’s estate when they are married, knowing that the ultimate inheritance was the full estate itself. This is the promise of a heavenly life with the Lord and this is the promise that leads to a new heaven and new earth, when finally, all is made right and creation becomes the dwelling place of God, to live among us forever, without death or suffering, only joy and peace, because we are in relationship with God.

If I’ve lost you, let me explain why all of this matters – Our expectations often dictate how we relate with God, how we relate with one another, how we treat ourselves, and even how we read and interpret scripture.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, there is a saying often used in meetings, that, “Expectations are premeditated resentments.” This means the expectations we place on people, on God, on ourselves, and anything in the world around us, set us up to resent others, resent God, resent ourselves, or anything else, if they do not meet our expectations.

Instead of expectations, what you will likely get from AA's big book and a meeting, is an emphasis on acceptance and gratitude, like we find in Psalm 27. You see, in the ways that expectations lead to disappointment and resentment, acceptance and gratitude instead build up relationships.

The one thing the writer of our Psalm seeks is relationship with God, It is to dwell in the house of the Lord for a lifetime, and to inquire in the temple of the Lord, which is the meeting place of heaven and earth, the place of God's presence.

For the Psalmist, there is no reason to fear, even as evil doers seek to devour our flesh, even if enemies encamp armies against us, for we can be confident of the Lord's presence. We can be confident that the Lord will protect us, even in the face of adversity. This does not mean everything we want will happen, but that even in the most trying parts of our life, we are not alone. God is with you. God's expectation for you in the challenges of life is for you to know God is there, with you, and loves you, having shared in all you're going through.

This ultimately is the promise for every one of us, from the youngest to the oldest: That through faith in Jesus, we can expect that God revealed in him is with us. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Likewise, Jesus says that by knowing him, you know the Father. Often, we put expectations on this phrase as well, that coming to the Father through Jesus means a specific prayer, a specific denomination or experience.

What Jesus tells us here is that he is the mediator between humanity and divinity. He is the one who is fully divine and one with the Father, and yet also human like us. He fully lived within your limits to live as you live and die for you, so that from that cross he would rise again and give new life to all of us. This new life is for all of you as young people. So, we as the church are the place where God's presence is in and among us by the Holy Spirit, not for us to hold on to and be proud, saying we are going to heaven, but so we share that life and love with others. The church is the bride of Christ for which, Jesus goes ahead to prepare a room.

Indeed, Jesus says, "believe in me" meaning, "have faith in me," or "trust in me," But if you do not believe, believe for the sake of the works, or on account of the works. This phrase is central to understanding so much of the gospel of John because this gospel is about drawing us into relationship with God through Jesus, so, signs and wonders, miracles and works only matter if they build that relationship with God.

Jesus heals the blind man so that he and all who see him will believe and so that all who hear the story might also believe. But our expectations get in the way because Jesus says you are going to do greater works than he did. How many of us have healed a blind person? Maybe some through medical means, but apart from that, not any of us. He says also, ask anything in my name, and you'll get it. How many of us throw "in Jesus's name" at the end of a prayer just hoping it comes true?

We have this elusive idea of what this means, not because the text is unclear, but because of the expectations we bring to it. Our expectations make us think it's about the work itself, not the result of the work. Faith is the desired result. What makes the work great is not that someone can see, but that someone believes.

So, let me ask you this – Were there more followers of Christ when he said this to the 12, or are there more followers of Christ today? A lot more. So, would you say the actions of the church are

far greater than what Jesus had done up to this point. The answer is “yes.” We have seen hundreds, then thousands, then millions, and now billions come to relationship with God through Jesus. Indeed, this is a far greater work than Jesus’s miracles.

This is made possible only by the life of the Word in our flesh, his death, and resurrection, so do not read that this means greater than who Jesus is and what he did on the cross. He hasn’t gotten to that point, so he’s talking about miracles like healing the blind man. So he predicts that what the church will do is greater, and that means each and every one of you is capable of revealing Jesus and his love, helping others to know that they are known and loved by God. That is the greater work. This is the miracle worker you can be.

Don’t get caught up in expectations of performing miracles like healings no one could possibly believe. No, the miracle is the belief that you are loved and your actions to share that love so others believe too. Your calling and God’s expectation is that you know that you are loved, and that you share that love with others. You do not have to be a pastor to do so, nor do you have to be famous, or rich, or greater in any way than you are right now. You are already capable of great things.

We adults have a tendency to place expectations on you, about who we think you should be. In the church, we will often say things like, “The youth are the future of the church.” But this ignores that you are not only the future, but you are the present. You are as much a part of this church and called to these greater works, as much as any adult. You adults are called also, to know that you are loved by the Triune God, who in the Son, shared in your humanity, knowing all your limits, died for you and rose again for you.

It’s not about me, or Carol Ann, or staff, because the church is you. The church is the people. The only expectation, the only hope I have for you, is that you know this and believe this, because you are capable of great things, capable of sharing God’s love through you. That’s my prayer for you, that you know this. God loves you and the Spirit is in you and among you.

So, let’s get back to Harry Potter, for in the end, he lays down his expectations of himself and the expectations others have for him. He was the one who was destined to vanquish Voldemort, yet he lays down his own life, seeming to lose it, just as Christ laid down his life. Ultimately it is his self-giving love triumphs always over evil. Love triumphs.

Grownups – We have many expectations we place on the young people in our lives. But ultimately, as people of faith, our one expectation for them is our own responsibility. We must take our own knowledge of God’s love for us and share it with them. Our job is not to make our children and others into the image we create and want them to be, but into the image of God they were created to be. Ultimately, our focus should be on this.

In the house of God, there are many rooms, and there will be many different people there. In the new creation, people of every tribe and nation will be resurrected, and you can be sure this means people of every interpretation of scripture and every idea about how things should be governed, but all with one common thread – they came through Jesus.

Some in ways we understand and might expect will be there, such as our own concepts of faith, but others, likely in ways that we won’t understand or expect at all to get in, will be there, because Jesus alone, not any of us, is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.