

**“Greater Expectations” based on Genesis 14:16-24 and Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:32-45
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 17, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

I have a question to start off with: What would you do if you could rule the world? What if you were in charge? This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges the Christian church has ever faced. We are called to have dominion over all creation, to be a royal priesthood, to be a light to every nation and we have even been given God’s armor. Phrases like these from scripture, when taken out of context, can be used to justify the pursuit of power and strength, because if we, the Christians, just had all the power, then we could fix all the problems in the world.

On Friday night, we had movie night in the Mangione household, complete with a picnic, spread out in the living room with Claire, Harrison, Josephine, Grammy, and me. We watched ‘Zootopia,’ a movie about mammals, from all kinds of species, both predators and prey, living together in a bustling city, like they were people. In this city, there is still crime, prejudices, illness, and struggles, but the city is literally run by a lion and his lamb assistant. *(I love when movies have these subtle biblical references, better still when we can find gospel themes, hiding in these movies unexpectedly.)*

The main character is a rabbit, Judy Hopp, the first rabbit to be hired in Zootopia as a police officer. She was top in her class, she did everything right to be there, but on her very first day, she is dismissed by her police chief and assigned to writing parking tickets. She wants to fight crime, to take down bad guys, but she’s at the bottom. She decides to do her job better than anyone had before her. She writes more than 200 parking tickets all before noon. But the result of doing her job the best she could, was that it made the lives of others harder. This was not what she expected. She did everything right, but still, she was either overlooked, or even hated.

Now, I want to warn you, there may be a spoiler or two in what I’m about to say, but I figure, you’ve had nearly five years to see this movie, so if you haven’t seen it yet, that’s on you. I’ll let it fly anyway. Now, as I said, there are prejudices that remain in this utopian mammal city. Rabbits, for starters, are not considered tough enough to do police work, and many of the herbivores, the prey, simply cannot trust predators.

Though all are civilized, some herbivores still fear carnivores. In fact, the ultimate villain of the story is a herbivore who thinks her actions, her crimes, are justified to protect the herbivores, to give them all of the power, because it would ultimately make the city even safer. In her mind.

I really appreciate when movies have this kind of complexity in their characters, because too often, the stories that we let shape our lives and how we see the world, especially those we show our children, often portray clearly good and clearly evil characters in some struggle, when the truth is that we are all flawed creatures. We are all people who make choices. Some good. Some not so good. Some really bad.

In Reformed theology we often talk of total depravity, but the point of this is not for us to condemn others, but the point is to refrain from judgement, since we all fall short. Even when we think our choices are made for good, we may realize that we did fall short, like a rabbit

writing hundreds of parking tickets. Like the same rabbit who later arrests the wrong person, or a lion mayor with failed policies, or a herbivore whose fear leads to hate.

These are the types of flawed characters, like us, that we also find in scripture, where even the heroes have a laundry list of shortcomings, and most of the villains even, are actually worthy of our sympathies. I think first of the Pharaoh in the story of the Exodus. It says 'God hardened his heart.' This poor guy, it's not even his choice so you can feel bad for him plague after plague. And I want to criticize Abram (or Abraham), the patriarch of patriarchs, who lies, schemes, and disobeys God.

But before I talk more about Abram, I want to start with the flaws of James and John. You see, this is the third time that Jesus teaches the disciples about what it means, for him to be the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed King, sent by God. And each time, the disciples respond by showing they don't understand. First Peter rebukes Jesus, then the disciples argue about status, and now, James and John make a request of Jesus.

This request comes after Jesus's most detailed description of what will happen to him – the humiliation of being betrayed, not once, but twice, mocked, spit on, whipped, and killed. But on the third day, he will rise.

Now, after the first prediction with Peter, it is easy to assume he missed the resurrection part. After the second, we are told the disciples did not understand and were afraid to ask. Now James and John want to be at the right and left of Jesus in his glory – the typical places to find a King's political and military adviser. James and John are imagining Jesus's glory to be a throne. I believe James and John actually think they understand what's going on now. In this way, they are like us, the church today. They are focused on the resurrection. Sure, we get it – Jesus had to suffer – now give us the good life.

But the place of Jesus's glory in the gospels is not the resurrection, but the cross. This is especially so in Mark's and in John's gospel, yes, tradition says this is same John, who says, it is when the Son of Man is 'lifted up,' when he is crucified, that he is in his glory. The spots to the right and left of Jesus are not for high-ranking advisers, but have been reserved for a couple of rebels, the thieves crucified on Calvary's hill with him. The resurrection is the affirmation of what Jesus has done, the new creation born of Jesus's death on the cross, where our God took on our flesh to die for us, upending every worldly expectation.

So, even if at this point James and John understand that Jesus will rise again, they have not understood what it is that Jesus wants from them and expects of them. Jesus has already told them that they are to take up their cross and follow him. He has already said that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And now, Jesus tells them: the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom, or payment, for many.

James and John wanted to rule as the nations do, by wielding power for their own gain. But Jesus says this is not how it should be among them. This is not how it should be among Christians, among those who believe in him. He says, *'Whoever desires to be great among you, will be your servant. And whoever desires to become first, will be a slave of all.'*

In this way, we all become like priests, appointed to serve others, to present to others the presence of God within us, because we are temples, as the Apostle Paul has said, of God's Holy Spirit prepared by Jesus's death. We share in this death by our baptism, and while it redeems us. It does not eliminate the challenges of life or even our suffering. However, it shows us that we are not alone in this, Jesus has been in our place. And also, through the Spirit, he remains with us in every trial that we face.

The writer of Hebrews expands on this, stating that Jesus is our high priest, our mediator. Just as the human high priest knows what it is to be a flawed human being, Jesus knows us and can bear gently with us who are ignorant and misguided. This is not because Jesus is flawed as we are, for the writer of Hebrews also tells us that Jesus is like us in all but sin. Rather, it is because Jesus, our mediator, has learned through submission, not just as a human to God, but as God to what it is to be in our humanity. Through his suffering for us, which made him perfect, or complete, we have Jesus, the Son, the very Word made flesh, sharing in our humanity in order to give us a share of God's life, which is abundant and eternal.

My sisters and brothers, James and John endured their own baptisms like Jesus's baptism, their own immersion in suffering, in the struggles of what it is to be a human. No matter how comfortable you are, or how afflicted you are, the reality is the human experience is not all joy. Human life is hard. It is not easy and that is the life God shared in Christ for us. It's the life James had when he became the first martyr and John when he was exiled to an island late in his life.

In today's reading, they expected to reign in worldly power with Jesus, but instead, they later shared in his glory by sharing in the ministry of Christ, a ministry of reconciliation meant to restore all of creation, which groans with us, and with God's own Spirit in and among us, for all things to be reconciled or brought back to God. Now, for some reason, and this always baffles me, God chooses us, flawed as we are, and expects us, to share in this divine ministry through our love and service.

James and John, and most of their fellow Jews in that time had different expectations. They had a different vision for what it would mean to have a Messiah come. But this is not to say that something changed, and that is the point of Hebrews. You see, the writer is showing a continuity between the Hebrew scriptures, and the revelation that happened when the Word became flesh. The story of Melchizedek is a foreshadow of Jesus. This is not to say, as some have thought, he is Jesus appearing in the Hebrew scriptures. This is possible, but it doesn't have to be what we are looking at, to show how Melchizedek reveals the purpose of Christ.

You see, Melchizedek, the name, means, 'King of Justice,' or the 'King of Righteousness,' and he is described as the 'King of Salem,' which is an Anglicized way of saying 'Shalom,' meaning 'a peaceful wholeness.'

And Melchizedek appears in this text at an amazing moment in the story of the Patriarch Abram. You see, Abram has just defeated a four-nation army with just 318 soldiers. Take that Spartans and your 300 at Thermopylae. He defeated them on his own and survived. What he had done was something a five-nation army led by Sodom could not do over several years.

In this moment, Abram could take control of the region. Nine nations could now become his subjects to rule. But he is met by the King of Justice and Peace, who blesses him with bread and wine. Abram lays down his right to rule, giving 10 percent of all he obtained to Melchizedek, and when the King of Sodom tries to make sure he gets his share of the spoils of war, Abram gives it all to him, so that no one might think Sodom's king made him rich.

Melchizedek is a priest and king, who when Abram encountered him, inspired Abram to give up worldly power in that moment through his blessing, and instead, Abram trusted in the inheritance the Lord had already promised. We live in a world of expectations – that if we do everything right, we will be rewarded. We expect that God desires for us as Christians to have power over others to set them straight. We think this means that those who thrive, are in God's favor. We think that those who are suffering, have maybe fallen out of favor with God. We want our faith in Jesus to be a free pass from life's challenges, a solution to all our troubles, to make them all go away. We want to see ourselves as the good ones, and others as the evil ones we are fighting against.

But the truth is that God has greater expectations for us, even though we are still sinners. Like Abram, we are not called because we have done something to earn God's love. Likewise, neither James nor John had done anything to justify their calling either. Like them, God calls us, and God expects us to respond – that's all we can do. All we can control is how we respond when we encounter Jesus, who is our eternal King of Righteousness, Justice and Peace.

Our calling is not to wrestle away the power of this world and use it to make others follow Jesus, but rather it is to lay aside the power of this world, as Jesus did, and serve one another as he did. That is how we will change the world. We may make mistakes along the way, like the Rabbit in Zootopia, but like her, reconciliation should be our goal. We should avoid the desire to rule as the world rules, the temptation to think that power at any cost is worth the price. Instead, we should trust in the inheritance promised by Christ.

So, then the questions we must ponder are not about what Christians should do if in power, but rather, 'How will I, or we as a church, respond with love to the challenges life throws at us?' And, 'How can I, or we as a church, be of service with the resources we have been given?' This is important for us as individuals, and for us as a church community, because we are expected to share in God's mission for this world – The ministry of reconciliation here and throughout the world.

My siblings in Christ, you're God's beloved. You truly are. As such, God has greater expectations for us than just reflecting the world's power and priorities as James and John expected. As individuals and as a community, we have many resources to give in service to others, not authority over them. How will we respond to these blessings? How will we use what God has given us as individuals and as a church? My prayer is that we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and respond to the Father's call to serve Christ our Lord. Amen.