

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

EXPERIENCE, EXPECTATION AND SURPRISE

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EXPERIENCE, EXPECTATION AND SURPRISE

Towards the end of Christopher Fry's play, The Lady's Not For Burning, one finds this disquieting exchange:

Margaret says, "Have any of you seen that poor child Alizon? I think she must be lost."

Nicholas answers, "Who isn't? The best thing we can do is make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can. Now don't be worried. She can't be more lost than she was with us." 1.

"The best thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can." To minimize our alienation and make sense of life is a concern to which we give ourselves all our days. There is a lot of reality out there to be reckoned with; a bewildering assortment of values from which to choose; an obstacle course to manage; a sizeable amount of chaos on which to impose some order; a network of systems that calls for resistance or compliance. And we have to do this reckoning, choosing, managing, ordering, resisting and Complying with a self that is housed in a vulnerable body -- a heart-beat away from death -- and within a span of time that at its longest is all too short!

Two resources have been given us with which to cope: These are experience and expectation. With all due respect to the existentialists, without experience and expectation none of us could live!

* * *

Experience is the word we use to denote a remembered past. Fortunately all the ground we break is not fresh. We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. Each generation does not have to discover anew the law of gravity or the light bulb.

In a broader sense the lessons of history are there to illumine our understanding. The graffiti on Belshazzar's wall holds truth for nations in the present. As do the death of Socrates, the ovens of Dachau or Elsen and the Bay of Pigs.

Not only so, but we carry with us the lessons of our own personal history. Day by day, thank God, we are not called upon to break fresh ground. It is amazing, when one thinks on it, how often some remembered circumstance rises up to influence our conduct in the present.

Back when I was in college in the Roosevelt years (that's Franklin, not Theodore) I had a roommate with whom I shared a washbasin. We worked it out pretty well. He always shaved ahead of me in the mornings for which I had other advantages later on in the day. One morning Earl proceeded to shave. He was in a hurry. There was studying to do and exam time was coming. After he had finished scraping off his growth, he placed the razor down on the basin and bent over to rinse his face in cold water. As he reached for the faucet his finger slid right into the open face of the razor. An enormous gash developed that streaked the basin with blood. To this day, wherever I shave I never lay my razor on the surface of the basin. Experience!

Remembered bouts with indigestion monitor the food we eat. The consequences of a loss of temper urge us in the direction of a more patient nature. Recollections of former intimacies with God come back to haunt our slackness in religion. This is experience. We build upon the past. Those who will not learn the lessons of the past are bound to repeat its mistakes. Repeat situations keep coming up. Yesterday can help us now.

* * *

But joined to experience is the other faculty called expectation. We can recall the past, we can

also project a future. We know that certain courses will lead to predictable ends. The Club of Rome, for example, extrapolated a future for the world from present tendencies.

This also happens on a lesser scale in our personal biographies. So many years in school, then a degree and a job. So many dollars set aside each week, then money enough for a car. So many weeks of careful dieting, then a healthier and more attractive body. So many hours at the keyboard, then competence with the piano. So much time with God each day, then a surer spiritual discernment. Without our expectations we would be as good as dead! The present would entomb us! The curtain might just as well fall.

* * *

Experience and expectation enable us to live. Some of us lean more to experience. That is, we tend to be past-oriented. I can't tell you how many meetings I've been in where some new proposal was defeated on one of two grounds: We did it before, or we never did it before. The older we get the more we tend to rely on experience.

Others of us are given more to expectation. This is largely true of the young who prefer experimentation to experience. This accounts, in part at least, for the enormous tensions that we feel between the generations.

In a viable society both are necessary. All experience and no expectation would produce a cautious dullness. All expectation and no experience would issue in a fatal recklessness. Experience and expectation.

* * *

Biblical faith goes beyond both! This is the burden of my word to you today. Biblical faith goes beyond both and adds to life the element of surprise!

Experience rests on memory, expectation rests on calculation, but surprise is nourished by faith and becomes the ground of hope.

Read the Bible again, this time with the throttle of your imagination wide open, and it will astound you how many surprises are packed among its pages. History is more than repetition because God's new keeps breaking in. History is more than calculation for more than could ever have been expected has happened and keeps happening today.

Israel itself is a surprise among the nations. I hope you caught the surprise in the Old Testament lesson of the day. (Gen. 17:1-8) Abraham is 99 years old. His wife is well past child-bearing age. The patriarch is drifting and yawning his way through an unwanted retirement beneath the oaks of Mamre. One day he looks up and sees three men go by. Desperate for company, he invites them in and offers them hospitality.

One of the three turns to Abraham rather boldly and asks, "Where is your wife?" Abraham replies, "What kind of place do you think this is? She's in the back in the kitchen." The man undaunted says, "She's going to become pregnant!" At this point there is laughter in the kitchen. Sarah has been listening in. When the visitors leave God says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and ask, 'Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for God?" Then just three chapters further on, we read that "the Lord did to Sarah as he had said and Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age." Surprise!! Isaac is born and the promise is vouchsafed.

A tiny minority, Israel's future is aborted by captivity in Egypt. Egypt has all the guns, all the money, all the power -- enough to enslave these people forever. Then surprise! God calls an "audible" at the Red Sea and commands Moses to go through center. And he does.

David goes out against Goliath. Experience says that the lad should at least be properly attired, so Saul's armor is provided. David graciously rejects the conventional equipment of battle and, surprise, the giant falls!

Israel has always, and lives today, in an environment of hostility -- larger nations that could, at least on paper, swallow her up. We describe Israel as extending from Dan to Beersheba. When I first learned those two extension points of the kingdom my mind imagined a vast expanse. But Dan to Beersheba is a mere 150 miles. A minister would drive it in three hours and a layman in two! It was no bigger than the size of Wales. Feature that! Yet Israel survives. And she serves as the carrier of promise. This has to be one of the choice surprises of the world!

And on it goes. A man is born to obscure parents in a backwoods province and becomes the most unforgettable character ever to walk the stage of history. His closest followers are nondescript yet they rise up and turn the world upside down. Surprise! We never would have thought it. He is soon put to death on an instrument of shame, but that cross becomes a cherished symbol of invincible love. Surprise! Surprise!

Always the surprises come. While the enlightened pagans are looking at the observable facts God moves in to surprise. Who would have thought that an unimpressive wisp of a man, clad in a loin cloth and carrying a bamboo stock, would be the one to set India free from foreign domination? What a surprise!

Who would have though that a tired Negro woman pressing for a seat on an Alabama bus would ignite a social revolution? Surprise!

Who would have thought that the most powerful nation in the world would come a cropper in the rice patties of Vietnam? Surprise!

Who would have thought that a policeman in Wash-

ington, D.C. noticing a strip of tape across the lock of a door in a new development would unseat a president and change the face of history? Surprise!

Beyond experience and beyond expectation surprises come. This is why Regis Debray is moved to say that, "Perhaps a new law -- or anti-law -- of history will have to be invented: the law of surprises. Whenever anything important happens in history it is always by surprise." 2.

* * *

Whence come such surprises? They are the doings of the Lord! That's it. They are the doings of the Lord. Another is at work. They are signs of what the Bible calls the kingdom of God. That kingdom which is featured in the prayer that teaches to pray, "Thy kingdom come." So Jesus said to the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed nor will they say, 'lo here it is or there'.....For behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (Lk. 17:20,21)

It is not observable. That is, it cannot be extrapolated from the facts of the present. If that were the case the kingdom would be confused with the humanist concept of progress. It cannot be seized. It cannot be ideologized. It cannot be captured by a party, or a nation or a system. Nobody can say, "lo here, lo there," "he's got it," "she's got it, I've got it." But it is real. It is made up of fresh starts, surprising turns, strange twists and innovations. Just when we think we have things figured out and have exalted common sense to a science, surprise! And the whole thing falls.

The kingdom of God is "in the midst of you" not "within you" as the King James has it. The kingdom is not a mystical inner state. We are talking about a state of affairs, not a state of mind. One always gets uneasy when ballroom religions talk about the God in you. Jesus never asked folks to let the king-

dom into their hearts. He summoned them to enter the kingdom. It is a reality, this kingdom, not a psychological condition. It is in the midst of us, that is, it is within the world we know. We cannot always see it because of our fixation with experience and expectation.

His surprises blow our minds. They are not like anything we have known or anything that we can easily prognosticate. Leave some room for God. The kingdom is mostly hidden at the moment. Its fullness has not yet dawned. It is both here and coming.

These surprises occur not only in the world-at-large but also in individual experience. I don't have to tell you that. You have walked past enough surprises to know what I am saying. The kingdom is local as well as universal.

One of our problems today is that we are overly influenced by two sciences that deal primarily with life as it is: sociology and psychiatry. I have no quarrel with either. But the gospel has to do with life as it might become. And you can study "what is" so much that you lose the ability to envision a better future. Experience and expectation become the railings to which we desperately cling. God is trying to shake our hands loose and alert us to his surprises.

Why, before this day is ended he could knock you off your feet! Something you read or hear. Some new person entering your life. Some experience of failure or success. Some prayer uttered in a moment of sheer exhaustion. An unwelcome illness or enforced idleness. You may be finished with yourself but God isn't.

This kingdom does not come with observable signs. You cannot control it. Nor will it ever be yours to say, "lo here" or "lo there," for behold this kingdom is in the midst of you. As you contemplate your future do not fail to factor in the kingdom! God is still on the premises. A creative, restless love

impels him. Somewhere, somehow when you least expect anything good to happen he may stop you in your tracks, turn you completely around and start you in a new direction. That's what faith is about. It moves beyond experience and expectation to surprise.

Surprises are impossible, you say. I answer, yes. But only the impossible is sure because it belongs to God!!

CLOSING PRAYER

*Have mercy upon us, O God, wheresoever
we have lived as enlightened pagans
rather than as children of faith.*

*Break open our little systems
and challenge our confidence
in common sense*

*until we make ample room
for visitations from on high.*

*So shall we be surprised
and convinced afresh that Thou
art God - and that Thy kingdom shall
prevail.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

FOOTNOTES:

1. Fry, Christopher, The Lady's Not for Burning, p. 88, Oxford University Press, New York, 1950
2. Quoted in God in Public by William Coats, p. 97, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974

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