

Contrary Expectations

Genesis 17: 1-8 Mark 8: 31-38

I've mentioned my cell phone before. All I want is a portable phone. I don't really need a smartphone. But there was a deal where you could get a \$30 smartphone and I figured, why not? I won't spend \$100 for a smartphone – I can't justify it – but \$30? The answer to that question, why not? would become painfully obvious. The phone had mixed reviews but I thought I'd give it a shot.

Despite a weak wifi signal, it did its computer work, its smart-work, in an adequate manner. But its phone function – the thing I really needed – was problematic. It would drop calls, lock up, and become unusable for a couple of minutes before getting itself back to functioning order.

Things came to a head on Thursday night when my son wanted me to join a conference call. I used my cell phone since it would be easiest to put on speaker phone as well as mute the sound at my end of the call. I called the designated number, got connected, and then the automated woman's voice said, "Please enter the code and press pound." At that moment the screen went black and was totally unresponsive. I pushed buttons, tapped madly at the screen, and began a stream of unkind words directed toward my cell phone. One thing still worked. Coming from the useless block of plastic was the voice, "Please enter the code and press pound."

I tried to lower the volume with the volume buttons on the side. Nothing happened except "Please enter the code and press pound" every 5 seconds. In desperation, I tried plugging it into the charger thinking a little juice may bring it back to life. Nothing. "Please enter the code and press pound." My vocabulary was soaring along with my anger. "Please enter the code and press pound." In sheer frustration, I whacked the phone on the table. "Please enter the code and press pound." Wait, did it just flash on and off? I whacked it a few more times. "Please enter the code and press pound." Yes, it did flash on and then off. Dead phone. "Please enter the code and press pound." I whacked it a few more times, which by the way is not a technique that I'm recommending as a method for treating your uncooperative smartphone. "Please enter the code and press pound." I got it to flash on and with cat-like reflexes tapped the "End Call" button before it blanked out again. Eventually, the start-up screen appeared and the voice stopped.

You would think that a sane person would not pursue this again. However, at this point, I had become delusional. I thought that maybe it was just that one instance and it would be fine on the second try. I called the number again, got connected, and the voice started again, "Please enter the code and press pound." The screen went black and I went through the whole hellish process once again. I used the landline to connect to the conference call, about 10 minutes late, which if you've ever done a conference call means you've really missed nothing at all in case there was anything to miss at all, besides the senior citizen who didn't mute the call who is either chewing food or wheezing into the phone and being heard by the ten other people on the call.

The first simple expectation is that the phone would work. That doesn't seem to be unrealistic on its face. The second simple expectation is that banging the phone viciously on a tabletop will not make it work better. The third simple expectation is that the previous experience was irregular and abnormal and would not repeat itself. All three simple expectations were soundly defeated by contrary results.

We are now prepared to deal with the contrary expectations that our scriptures pose this morning.

The first reading from Genesis recounts God's announcement of his covenant with his servant Abram. Abram, as a sign of his new covenantal status before God, is renamed Abraham. In this re-naming, he is identified as God's new creation within this new covenant; he has a new name befitting his new covenantal relationship with God. In today's society, we see the same thing happen in marriage when the bride may take the name of her husband in forging a new identity based on a new relationship. And men? Well, who do you think thought up the idea for women? At any rate, from Abraham, the promise of God will unfold in generation upon generation, in the land of Canaan.

If you read ahead, past all of the verbiage about circumcision, you'll read about God's changing the name of Sarai to Sarah, and how – at age 90 – she will have a son *so that she will be the mother of nations*. For the obvious reasons, it does not say that Abraham merely laughed. No. It says Abraham fell out, flat on his face busting-a-gut laughing. He is rolling on the ground. The text says: *Abraham fell down, laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'*

This is an epic failure. We may be more familiar with Sarah's outburst of laughter when the "visitors" come by, but Abraham is the first to laugh at the preposterous notion that these old geezers are going to have a baby. It is totally **nuts**. Maybe this is why Abraham can hear the ludicrous announcement in the next chapter about Sarah's impending pregnancy and **not** crack up there.

There is a very contrary expectation. Abraham really can't fathom it all at this point. He may imagine that life just goes on like always, but with this new covenant thingy tacked on. Abraham has not yet grasped the truly changed nature of everything for him and for Sarah going forward, in particular what the demands of faith are going to entail in fulfilling the promise of God that's been set before him. But he will be taught and learn and become the model of faithfulness. However, here he has totally crashed and burned in mocking derision of God's promise. Contrary expectations or outcomes are at the core of the faithful life.

Speaking of crash and burn, and epic failure, let's take a look at Peter in Mark 8. Bear in mind, Peter has just scored big brownie points for answering Jesus' question, *Who do people say that I am?* with his spot-on, no nonsense, *You are the Christ*. You can just about hear the standing ovation, except Mark is in such a hurry (as usual) that he blows immediately onto the next scene.

We hear Jesus painting the dark portrait of how he expects things to end for him. Suffering, rejection, execution, and then resurrection are what lie ahead. Peter listens to this disturbing discourse and feels the need to correct Jesus. Perhaps Jesus doesn't understand, hasn't read the right story line, has trouble marketing his skill set, is a bit depressed, or doesn't realize how the disciples have their mouths hanging open in disbelief. Quite frankly, in Peter's mind, Jesus is telling everyone that he's a loser. So Peter wants to display his leadership since he did correctly say, *You are the Christ*. These other guys just don't seem to know what to do. Peter knows and acts.

He pulls Jesus to one side and explains to him, 'This is *not* what you want to say. This is a loser narrative, and no one is going to follow around a loser, some guy who is going to end up crucified. What you want to say is how you're going to overthrow the power elite in the Temple and then drive the Romans out of Judea. Then you'll re-establish the monarchy as the new King David'

The Mark text actually says, *But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples ...* We can see that Peter had been carrying on with his corrective talk, and Jesus looks back and notices that the disciples are getting at least an eyeful if not an earful. There is no delicate way to admonish Peter at this point. Jesus cuts loose on Peter in no uncertain terms. *Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of mortals*. Ouch.

Jesus proceeds to gather a crowd as he explains what his ministry means, what the new promise – this new covenant in him is all about. This, too, is not going to be a crowd pleaser, but a lesson in contrary expectations.

If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.

This is akin to saying, *I want you to put a noose around your neck and join me at the gallows; put your head on this block and look into the basket; try on your blindfold and line up at the wall*. Like I said, not a crowd pleaser.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the sake of the good news will save their life.

Those who think that this "new covenant" business is simply a no-fuss add-on to everyday life are all wrong. Further, all of the previous expectations you have about how things are and will be, all of that should be given the heave-ho, too. A covenant faith brings out all kinds of contrary expectations and outcomes.

It means that this new covenant is not for *you* to manipulate to make into whatever *you* want, or to be designed for the expectations *you* have. This new covenant transcends our commonplace expectations – the worldly – *at the same time* that it confronts the world with the sacred commands for justice, righteousness, and peace among God's people, faithful to God, even unto death.

Lent is the journey to the cross, and it is the pathway to new life. That is where contrary expectations reach their highest form. The cross, the instrument of administrative terror employed by the Roman Empire, on which subjects are bound and made to die painfully and in humiliation, confounds expectations. The cross of agony and death becomes the symbol of new life and God's blessing of peace.

The Lenten journey is in the footsteps of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. On this pilgrimage, we should not be watching for familiar sights, for known signposts, or for common occurrences. Rather, the work of the Spirit and the hand of God would provide us with some jarring and even disturbing challenges. Our expectations should be overturned in a course that leads to the cross of death **and** new life.