

“Lowered Expectations”

John 1:43-51

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In 1994, the Vancouver Canucks went all the way to the Stanley Cup finals. Led by Trevor Linden, Pavel Bure and Kirk McLean, this scrappy team of underdogs beat Calgary and Dallas and, sweetest of all, the Toronto Maple Leafs, to reach the finals against the New York Rangers, took them to seven games and then lost in heartbreaking fashion when Nathan Lafayette hit the post. That was the first time I really cared about hockey, and it was so exciting, and after getting over the disappointment of the loss, I was so eager for hockey to start back up again, because I was sure that the Canucks would be right back there the next year, that it was only a matter of time before they finished what they started and brought the Stanley Cup back to Vancouver.

And the next year, when they went out in the second round of the playoffs, I was devastated. Losing in the second round of the playoffs? Unacceptable! But of course, it only got worse from there. Every year it just got worse and worse, as the team fell apart and missed the playoffs again and again and their best players got traded away for draft picks and spare parts. Now, I’m a lot older and at least a little wiser. After a quarter century of watching hockey and cheering for a team that most of the time hasn’t been very good at playing it, I have lowered my expectations substantially. And that’s what makes this year so strange – I came into this season expecting nothing – expecting the team to wallow at the bottom of the standings like they have every year for so long, and now all of a sudden, the Canucks might be good, but I’m trying not to get my hopes up too high, I’m trying

to keep my expectations low, because when you don't expect much, you can't be disappointed. When you start out believing in something, in someone, you have such high expectations, such lofty dreams of greatness and glory, but as time goes by, you get a little less hopeful and a little more cynical, and you lower your expectations so the disappointment doesn't hurt as much.

And I think this is true of more than just hockey. When you're young, you believe that politicians can make a difference – that if we just get the right people in power, we can really change the world. But so often the leaders we choose end up disappointing us, and so we lower our expectations. We used to expect that the world was going to get better and better, the economy was going to keep going up and up, that we'd leave a brighter and better world for our children and grandchildren than the one we inherited, but now we're resigned to the fact that climate change is irreversible and the divide between rich and poor is just too vast, and we're just trying to survive through whatever catastrophe is on the schedule this month, with very little hope of fixing anything long term. Life has a way of lowering our expectations, making us more easily satisfied, making us accept a certain amount of pain and misery because we think this is the best we can do.

I think this is what Nathanael must have been feeling when Philip first told him about Jesus. After all, the people of Israel had been waiting for God's Messiah, the chosen one who would rescue them from all their troubles and bring God's kingdom to earth once and for all, for a long, long time. It had been one thousand years since God first promised King David that one of his descendants would sit on an everlasting throne over all the world, and yet after David's death his kingdom just got smaller and poorer and more insignificant. It had been five

hundred years since that kingdom was finally destroyed, overrun by their enemies, and ever since then, God's people had struggled just to survive, ruled by all kinds of different empires, some more benevolent than others. And throughout all those long centuries, there were lots of people claiming to be the Messiah, claiming to be the one who would conquer their enemies and set them free, but they all failed. They all disappointed. Eventually, each movement fizzled out, the leaders arrested or killed or fled for their lives. And every generation would just lower their expectations a little bit more, and a little bit more, and every time another would-be Messiah came along, they'd try so hard not to get their hopes up, not to believe that this time might be different, so they wouldn't end up getting disappointed when things inevitably fell apart.

So when Philip comes running up to Nathanael sitting under the fig tree and breathlessly tells him that it's happening, they've found the Messiah, the one Moses and the prophets predicted, Nathanael is unimpressed. He is skeptical, cynical, and he dismisses Philip's enthusiasm out of hand. Suuuuuure, Philip. Suuuure. After all this time, you've found the Messiah, and he's from a backwater dead-end town like Nazareth. Yeah, that's likely. It'd be like someone telling you they've found the lost ark of the covenant, and the Holy Grail, and the fountain of youth, and they're all in a dumpster behind an abandoned gas station in Whalley. It sounds like Nathanael has had his heart broken by empty promises a few too many times to be taken in so easily by another flim-flam artist with something to sell. But he goes along with Philip to meet Jesus, and when Jesus greets him with a compliment – “now here is a genuine son of Israel, a man of complete integrity”, Nathanael isn't about to be taken in by flattery. Sure, sure, buddy – how do you think you know anything about me?

And then Jesus tells Nathanael that he knows him, because he saw him. He saw him, sitting under the fig tree, before Philip came to him. Jesus shows Nathanael just the tiniest glimpse of who he is and what he is capable of - he reveals to this skeptical cynic that there is reason to hope, because Jesus isn't just another con artist, another phony contender who will only let him down. Jesus sees Nathanael, Jesus knows Nathanael, he saw him before Philip did, he knew him before Nathanael knew himself. Jesus saw all the times Nathanael's heart was broken, all the disappointments, all the failed hopes, Jesus saw each and every tragedy that lowered Nathanael's expectations until all that was left was cynicism and doubt.

Jesus saw all of that, and that's all he has to say to Nathanael for this remarkable transformation to take place. In an instant, all Nathanael's doubts and fears, his pain and cynicism, it all melts away and is replaced by hope, by the absolute certainty that this man from Nazareth standing before him is the Son of God, the King of Israel, the one he's been waiting for his whole life. And in reply to Nathanael's declaration of faith, Jesus tells him, "just watch what I do next." If seeing you under the fig tree was enough to melt your cynical heart, just keep watching what Jesus will do next. Nathanael's expectations were so low, Jesus didn't have to do hardly anything to change Nathanael's heart and mind, to heal his broken hopes, to open his eyes.

All he had to do was show Nathanael that he knew him, that he understood his trouble and his past and his pain, that he saw Nathanael for who he truly is. But Jesus was going to do more than just see Nathanael, understand his pain, know him for who he truly was. Jesus was going to take that pain, and heal it, take all the brokenness, all the misery, all the disappointment and disillusionment

Nathanael had suffered and transform all of that darkness into light, to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, once and for all. All Nathanael needed to do was believe, to hope, to look into the future and expect that God was still at work in his world, ready to do amazing things, to save his people again, to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

It's easy to look at our world, and see it in the same way Nathanael did, to only see the broken promises, the trouble, the pain. It's easy to just keep lowering our expectations to the point where they're so low, it's impossible to be disappointed any more, because we're just not expecting much. We can read the Bible, and see all these lovely promises of God's love for us, God's peace and joy and strength promised to God's people through the power of the Holy Spirit, but so often we don't really expect God to keep those promises. We don't really think God will come through. We keep coming to church, we gather to sing and pray, but we're not expecting much to happen. We just want enough encouragement to make it through our week – a little pick-me-up so we've got a reason to keep trudging from Sunday to Sunday through this messy, broken world.

We ask God for only the bare minimum to survive because we're not really sure that there's much more to ask for, much more God can really do for us. And that's not what God wants for us. There is so much more, so much more that God wants to give us, more blessings, more joy, more love than we can possibly imagine. Our God sees us and knows us – Jesus knows our pain, our past, our present troubles and our future worries, and Jesus wants to provide for those daily needs and worries, but that is only the beginning, only the tiniest tip of the vast riches of glory and love our God wants to pour out on us. CS Lewis wrote

that “our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like a child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” God’s plan for us is more than just survival, more than giving us just barely enough to make it through the trouble of this world. In Jesus Christ, our God has opened a way between heaven and earth, a stairway for his love and light and power to move in mighty, unexpected, unimaginable ways, and that means we can live as people of hope, people who are expecting the unexpected, expecting God to do mighty things in our world and in our lives.

Our God wants us to expect more, to look at the troubles of this world and see them not as impassable obstacles but as opportunities for God’s glory and love to be displayed in this world. Today, we are called to keep our eyes open, keep our hearts open, keep waiting for God’s power and love to break through in this world in ways we don’t expect, to trust that we will see heaven opened, we will see God as we are seen by God. Today, may we expect the unexpected and know that God is at work among us in the lowliest places, and all we have to do is come and see, see what God is up to, see what God can accomplish in our lives and in our world. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.