UNEXPECTED GIFTS

(1/6/13)

Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:1-10
Mark 16:14-18

“But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’” (Acts 3:6)

Do you remember how you used to feel as a child when you came downstairs on Christmas morning? I do. Christmas morning is the ultimate confrontation between expectations and reality, the existential experience of the inevitable dissonance between what you hoped you would get in life and what you actually got.

I remember how, as a child, I wanted a pony for Christmas. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with it; I just wanted it. So I would come down on Christmas morning hoping for a pony. It was not that there was anything wrong with the electric train or the erector set that Santa left me; it just wasn’t a pony.

But I was an incurable optimist. I remember how one year, in an attempt to break me of my equine obsession, my parents left a big pile of horse manure in the middle of our living room. I think they were trying to tell me that having a horse is not all fun and games. However, I happily started digging through the pile of manure. When my father asked me what I was doing, I responded, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s manure, there has to be a pony!” As I said, I was an incurable optimist.

I don’t look for ponies any more. Actually, if the truth be told, every Christmas morning I glance out at our driveway to see if there is a brand new Mercedes or BMW with a big red bow on the top of it. I saw this on television, and it seemed like a good idea, a good way for a wife to say “I love you” to her husband.

This Christmas morning when I glanced out at our driveway, I discovered that a little red bow approximately two inches across had been placed on the hood of my 2001 BMW. Attached to it was a note that said, “This car, even with 280,000 miles on it, is still running fine. Let’s
celebrate not having any car payments again this year.” I am just a hopeless romantic. Fortunately my wife is a pragmatic, down-to-earth realist.

As we meet here at the beginning of a new year: looking back on the year that has past and peering into the darkness and mystery of the year to come, let’s think about what we expected and what life actually brought us in the year that is coming to a close. Let’s also think about the year to come, what we anticipate. We know that reality will invariably differ from our expectations, sometimes in dramatic or unexpected ways.

Our scripture lesson this morning raises the issue of expectations. It speaks to our need for a faith-filled stance toward the uncertainty of the year that lies ahead. It reminds us that life will bring not only pain and tragedy, which it will; it will also bring unexpected gifts. These gifts, which arise from the light of God’s presence, are God’s way of compensating for the darkness that is so powerful and ubiquitous in our world.

In this passage we encounter a man who is lame. Perhaps the ailment is physical, a certain weakness of the muscles. Perhaps his disability refers to something else, to a weakness in the way this man is approaching life. The exact nature of his condition isn’t important. What is important is that he is not healthy, not whole.

The man sets up his begging station just outside the temple. At least we know there is nothing wrong with his mind, for he has selected the ideal location. Most of us would find it difficult to walk past a beggar as we enter church on a Sunday morning. Certain words of scripture might come to mind, e.g., “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.”

As Peter and John approach the temple, the man brings his expectations to bear on the encounter. He hopes they will give him money. He receives something quite different, quite unexpected, and infinitely more valuable.

And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his
feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

The man asks for something to make his disability more bearable. What he receives is the power to overcome his disability, to be healed. He misjudges what Peter and John might have to give, for they appear to be poor, simple fishermen. Peter and John give only what they have. However, because of their faith, what they have is a lot.

Remember, all the people in the Bible are part of us. If we identify with the beggar, we may discover some similarities: for we, too, are limited and in need of healing. The healing for which we long may be physical: our need to be healed of some condition that keeps us from living a healthy and vital life. The healing for which we long may be emotional: our need to be healed of some affliction that torments us or causes strife in our relationships. The healing for which we long may be spiritual: our need to reconnect with the spiritual center of our life. When we identify with the beggar we come face to face with our own need to be healed.

We all have our weaknesses and infirmities, the self-defeating attitudes and limiting self-concepts that undermine the fullness of our response to life. God has the desire and the power to heal us, if we will open ourselves in faith. Here is where our expectations can hold us back. We know what we want from life and from God, when what we need may be different. When God doesn’t meet our expectations, we may turn away angry and bitter, missing the unexpected gift that we have actually been given.

I know it sounds strange, but many of us seem to have no expectations of God. Is it because we really don’t believe in God’s healing power? We live our lives as if God didn’t exist. We don’t bring God into the depths of our relationships, our struggles and our conflicts. We don’t utilize the resources of our faith in time of trial or make our faith the center of our emotional and spiritual growth.

Our expectations of God may be too limited, but they may also be unrealistic. They are unrealistic when we expect God to construct a life for us where pain, illness, tragedy, and death play no role. This is not the kind of life God wills for us. God does not always remove the
burdens that life places on our shoulders; he does give us the resources we need to carry them. God also gives us opportunities for love, experiences of healing, and moments of joy if we will only open our hearts to receive them.

Think of the expectations we brought to the year we have just lived. Last year was not what I expected or probably what you expected. Is it ever? I suspect it brought more pain and hardship that you anticipated. For many of us here this morning it brought illness. It may even have brought the death of someone we loved.

Yet we meet here at the threshold of a new year to renew our faith, to affirm our trust in that God who is the source, the sustaining power, and the end of all life. We come to draw strength and comfort from each other that we might not only be the recipients of unexpected healing in the year to come but that we might offer that healing message, that healing presence to others.

As we step forward into a new year let us try to remember all the wonderful things that happened to us in the year that is coming to a close. We should remember those moments when our lives were touched by love; those unexpected experiences of healing that took place. When we were struggling, someone reached out to us. When we were feeling alone, someone visited us. When we were discouraged, someone or perhaps even the scriptures spoke a word of hope. When we were going through a difficult time, we were sustained by the knowledge that people cared. Then we can discern how God’s guiding, sustaining presence accompanied us on our journey.

The Gospel tells us we should face life with the eager expectation of the beggar by the temple gate. We should also remember that what we expect, what we think we want from life, will probably be quite different from the life we actually experience, the life we will actually live. Life will not be what we expect: in many ways it will be better.

When we remember that all the people in the Bible are a part of us, we, like Peter and John may discover resources we can utilize in our outreach to others, including the healing power of our intercessory prayer. Peter and John were disciples who, after their encounter with
the Holy Spirit, became apostles, people who were charged by Jesus to carry the good news of God’s healing love to the world.

Like Peter and John, we are called to be apostles, incarnations of Jesus’ spirit in the world. We are called to share what we have with those who are in need. We are called to respond to the beggar who sits by the gate of the temple, no matter where or in what form we encounter him in the year to come.

As apostles, we often set our expectations too low in what we expect from our religion and in what we give to the world. We need to remember that Jesus gave his disciples “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.” If we embark upon our life as individuals and as a church with an attitude of faith, we will see miracles in our lives and in the lives of others.

Like Peter and John, we can only give what we have. However, what we have to give is a lot. Because we are more than we think we are, we have more to give than we realize. We may not only receive unexpected gifts in the year to come; we may be an unexpected gift. We may be or have exactly what someone needs, what our church needs, and what our world needs in the year to come.

Let us now begin the new year as we enter into the presence of our Lord through the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

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A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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