

## "Images and Expectations"

Job 7:1-7; I Timothy 1:12-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 24, 2016 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

The day before a New York City Marathon a certain runner told a reporter, "I feel confident." The next day Alberto Salazar came in first, setting a record for the race. By contrast the winner the previous four years said before the race, "I'm due for a fall here." Sure enough, he ended up fifth.

Two teenagers about to graduate high school went into the office of the guidance counselor. Both were good students, both had about the same grades, but one came from a low income family while the other was well-off. The guidance counselor advised the first one to go into a trade school and the second to go on to college. They both followed the advice given to them by the one regarded as the expert, though they were equally capable.

Betty Friedan, writing in her 1963 landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*, calls attention to the stifling attitude toward women in the 50's. She relates, "At one of the major women's magazines, a woman editor, sensing that American housewives might be desperately in need of something to enlarge their world, tried for some months to convince her male colleagues to introduce a few ideas outside the home into the magazine. 'We decided against it,' the man who makes the final decisions said. 'Women are so completely divorced from the world of ideas now, they couldn't take it.'"

A while back I asked a member to take on a challenging job at the church. She told me frankly that she had never done anything like this. Then she said, "I'll take a try. I don't see any reason why I shouldn't be able to do it. Just bear with me."

We constantly send messages to ourselves about what we expect from ourselves. And we receive messages from others, too, about what they expect, or don't expect, from us. How we do in life—our successes or failures—is tied closely to those expectations. No athlete wins who is already defeated before the game begins. But, conversely, people often defy the odds and rise to a challenge when they are convinced that success is possible.

The messages that get through to us are important because they often shape the outcome of things pending. A case in point is Job from the Old Testament. In today's reading, this beleaguered man sends some pretty dour messages to himself. He says, in essence, that life is futile.

"Do not humans beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a laborer, like a slave ... so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me ... My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens then breaks out again ... My days come to their end without hope ... My eye will never again see good."

Well, that's pretty gloomy stuff. Job did have it bad. Yet those kinds of messages to oneself aren't going to help any. And in his case, they didn't. Between the messages of despair brought to him by others, and his own negative thoughts, life just became worse and worse.

Have you known people like this? No matter what happens, only the bad side seems to get through. You say, "It's a great day today!" and they reply, "Yes, but we'll pay up for it tomorrow." You compliment them on how they look and their response is, "But I feel terrible." You offer them advice on a problem, to which they come back, "Oh, it won't work. Nothing will work." You see a valuable skill or talent they have, but they deny it by lamenting, "I'm not very good at anything."

I've got a friend like that. If it's possible for her to look on the dark side of a situation, that's always the view she sees. She approaches new situations half-defeated. Truthfully, she often ends up not doing well much of the time. And I think to myself, "Why does she give herself such disparaging messages? Who gave her such negative feelings about herself?" She has estranged herself from most of her family, and I suspect a lot of it has to do with her gloomy attitude. Sometimes it's hard for me to talk to her. She is so set in her ways and closed to much of life's promise.

After a long time of feeling sorry for himself, lamenting his hopeless situation, Job finally comes to a new understanding and he starts addressing his suffering more positively. When he allows himself some little messages of faith and hope, things start to improve for him. His trust in God is rekindled and perhaps that is the real spark of change.

Finally Job admits to God, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand ... My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you." So the book ends with Job's life and fortunes being restored, and things finish up even better than what they had been before his afflictions.

In varying degrees Job's experience is ours, too. Like him, we need to be aware of what we're telling ourselves. Do we say things like: "People just don't like me," or "I botch up everything I try," or "I'll never advance farther than I am." And so on. If so, you run the risk of making all those things come true...unnecessarily.

In their place there are constructive messages that may serve you far better. Consider: "I can do it." "I'll start today." "I can be equal to the challenge." "I can ask for help if I need it." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." These kinds of messages will help you get where you want to go. They take away the artificial roadblocks that are in the way. When you start to look on the brighter side regularly, you'll soon find that the world *is* brighter.

I'm a big fan of classical music. To me one of the most interesting and dynamic pieces for piano was written by Maurice Ravel in 1931. It's called the "Concerto in D for the Left Hand." Its unusual title comes from the fact that, in this long work, the right hand has no part at all. This concerto was written especially for pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in WWI. Ravel and other composers wrote for the left hand alone so that this artist might have a new repertoire to play, which he did throughout Europe.

Like Job, Wittgenstein must have come out of the war wondering what injury could have been more devastating to him. He struggled with conflicting messages about his abilities, his worth,

his future; but he chose to press ahead toward a renewed purpose in life. With this help from renowned composers who admired his courageous struggle, he resumed his former career and his artistry became even more apparent. He could play better one handed than most could play with two.

The apostle Paul, too, was a person filled with confidence despite all the many challenges he faced. While he never looked past his mistakes and imperfections, the little ascription we find in the first letter to Timothy is a testimony of his faith and a declaration of praise at the same time.

He gives thanks to Jesus who fills him with strength for his work, this despite his years of persecuting Christians. "And," he says, "our Lord poured out his abundant grace on me and gave me the faith and love which are ours in union with Christ Jesus ... God was merciful to me in order that Christ might show his patience with me, the worst of sinners, as an example for all those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. To the eternal King, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever."

Paul here is filled with confidence as a worker for Christ. Despite his past errors his attitude now is one that makes even hard things possible. He is convinced of his forgiveness and moves ahead to make amends and to further the Savior's work within the world.

Taken together, our lessons today remind us that the messages we send ourselves, and the messages we accept from others, will determine much of our success and happiness in life. Jesus encourages us to live out our days fully and to rely on him for the direction and strength we need. We are worthy even though we are far from perfect, full of potential even if we don't have all the gifts and talents we might like.

Remember this: with Christ as our companion for the journey, and a hopeful outlook, we may even surprise ourselves with what we can endure, what we can accomplish, and even the fun that we can have in doing it.