

## “Expectations”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: December 3, 2023



Please pray with me: *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Have you ever met someone who was famous?

If you have, what did you say?

How did you act?

What did you expect from them?

I didn't meet her, but I saw the Queen of England once. Lindsey and I took our oldest on a special trip to London and while we were seeing the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, the Queen and Prince Phillip drove by in their Rolls Royce. I think I squealed like a 10-year-old girl.

A friend of mine took a group of us out to a fancy dinner in New York City 5-6 years ago. When I looked up from our table, the future hall-of-famer and New York Yankee Aaron Judge was sitting down with his girlfriend. I spent the next hour being *very* smooth trying to sneak a casual selfie with my phone, and by taking multiple trips to the restroom while walking *v-e-r-y-s-l-o-w-l-y* by their table trying to work up the courage to say something (which I never did).

Two or three tours ago, my wife Lindsey's cousin got Taylor Swift tickets for Christmas. Sarah was in college at the time. It just so happened that after the concert Sarah was in a line waiting for something, and...what do you know...Taylor Swift walked by. Sarah doesn't remember what she said...she thinks it involved an open mouth and some stammering. But Taylor touched Sarah on the arm and said, "You look so pretty!" And I doubt if Sarah will ever forget it...

Have you ever had an experience like that...where you bumped into someone famous and didn't quite know what to do with your words or your hands?

Here's another question: how is it for you to talk to God?

Do you have frequent conversations with God – in your prayers or otherwise – to the degree that talking with God feels familiar?

Or, maybe it's the opposite – do you avoid eye contact and break-out into a cold sweat when you know someone might ask you pray – not because you don't want to speak in public, but you just don't know what you would say?

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Beyond the prayers and blessings that we memorize – the “Now I lay me down to sleeps” ...or the “Our Father, who art in heavens” ...or the “Thank you, Lord, for giving us foods!” ...when it is just you, and your words...if you to talk with God, what is your tone?

What is your approach?

And what do you find you expect...or hope...will come out of the conversation?

I have an educated guess...educated by being a pastor for 20 years who has visited with members about their relationship to God, and educated by my own faith journey (yes...pastors have their own faith journeys...our own relationships with God that take shape outside the hours where we preach or pray for a living). My experience tells me that...for a lot of us...when we talk with God, we tend to do one of two things:

- (1) We tend to be timid...some might call it “reverent” ...believing that we are either too insignificant, or too broken, or too out of practice to be worth any of God’s time or attention...so we don’t want to ask too much, or expect too much. Or...
- (2) When we talk with God we tend to be casual...maybe because we don’t expect it to matter, maybe because we’re not quite sure what we believe about God anyway, maybe because we think we’re pretty self-sufficient and we think that while God might *enrich* our lives<sup>1</sup>...talking to God won’t actually change us...and nor do we need it to.

My experience also tells me that sometimes both of those things are true...and it just depends on the day and with what is going on in our lives...I know that to be case for me, personally.

Today – on this first Sunday of Advent – we are going to hear a part of Scripture that can...perhaps...teach us something about how we are able to talk to, and address, and have *bold expectations* in our conversation with God.

You likely know that Advent is a season in the church’s year where we focus on waiting...and on expectation...ahead of what we celebrate later this month at Christmas. As a part of that waiting, we try to practice some self-reflection...and to think about the ways we might turn around from choices we have made and make in our lives that become stumbling blocks for us to become the people whom God wants us to be.

The reason I have preached half a sermon before reading this morning’s Scripture is because rather than running head-long into Advent as we fill our hours and minds with things we need to do to get ready for Christmas, I think it is important that we take a breath and ask ourselves, honestly: What, exactly, are we waiting for? What do we expect God will do? What do we hope will change about our world or our lives if God does show up? (And we do really want that?) And how can our approach, and connection, and relationship with God be more than formulaic...or timid...or casual – but one that can generate meaning and transformation for us?

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful here for the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana and her paper on this text way back in 2011 (The Well, Austin, 2011)

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The Scripture I will (finally!) read is from the prophesy of Isaiah. We often read Isaiah in Advent because in this prophesy we hear the same longing for God to show up that we still feel today. It's a longing that was addressed by what God did when Jesus was born into our world at Christmas...but one that God still promises to...one day...fulfill.

I am reading from the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. These are words spoken to God by a people who have been displaced, disappointed, and who feel diminished. Listen with me for a holy word...

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O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.  
We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
There is no one who calls on your name,  
or attempts to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,

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and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

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Since the preacher talked too much before he read the Scripture, let me cut to the quick and invite you to notice three things about what you just heard in this morning’s passage from Isaiah:

1. Notice that the people who used this direct and pointed language to demand that God would show up...notice that those people were sinful, broken, “like a filthy cloth,” often the opposite of righteous...and that even though they knew that...and admitted it...they asked a lot of God anyway.

The lesson there is that we don’t need to wait until we think we deserve God’s attention...we ask for it from a place of need.

2. Notice that God doesn’t always show up on the timeline that we would expect or hope. This passage from Isaiah is clear that there are times when the people felt like God was absent...or hard-to-see. (By the way, I’ll let Anna, Robert, and Lucy explain that to you all sometime when they preach...)

The lesson there is that – even when God doesn’t behave the way we wish God would behave – it still matters that we acknowledge and ask for what we need.

3. Notice the pronouns: “we are the clay.” “You are our potter.”

The lesson there is that we belong – fully – to the God who made us...and who takes delight in shaping us...and who lovingly claims us...always with a hand on the wheel.

There is a lot that goes on this time of year. How are you – “fine”

Advent can be hard because we don’t want to admit that we need things to change – or that we are afraid to admit...after spending so much energy making things okay...that we know some things do need to change and we don’t want it to all fall apart.

One of the ways I see God’s providence is by meeting with someone who is newly sober – and being reminded of what it means to be dependent on God.