

Rev. David E. Roberts, Hampton Baptist Church, January 15, 2012

CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF IT?

I Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

I recently read a report of a study involving elementary school children. The children placed into three groups were all equally average students. Controllers of the study made a significant change, though. They placed the three groups with three different teachers and told each teacher the status of the students. One teacher was told her group consisted of "exceptional" students. Another teacher was told that her group consisted of "average" students, and the third was told his group consisted of "slow" children. All of the students, however, were equal but classified differently. Throughout the school year all three teachers subconsciously treated their students just as they had been classified. At the end of the year the students were tested, and the results were startling. Although they began the school year as equals, at the end of the year each group scored exactly as they had been classified and treated. The "exceptional" students tested above average, the "average" scored in the middle and the "slow" students ended up with below-average test scores. In essence, each student lived up to the expectations and treatment given them ("Seeking, Finding, and Developing Leaders," Robert Logan, The Pastor's Update, March 1992).

What we expect often governs what we find. It's not that there are not other things there, but we have a tendency to find that for which we are looking. A man who stopped at a gas station told the attendant, "I'm thinking about moving in this area. What kind of folks live around here?" Wisely the attendant asked, "Well, what kind of folks have you found where you are now?" The stranger answered, "Well, most of them are pretty good folks." The attendant's reply was instructive. He said, "Well, I expect you can find the same sort of folks around here too."

Both of the passages we read this morning relate directly to expectations. No one really expected much from a young boy presented as an attendant at Israel's Tabernacle, the tent where God's presence was represented among the people before Solomon built the first Jewish Temple. Samuel had been brought as a child to Eli, but he was not even a member of the priestly tribe, so no one really expected much from him. It was at that point of low expectations when the word of the Lord was infrequent that God began calling Samuel to a life of ministry as one of the key figures of the biblical story. No one was expecting God to act through one who was just a boy.

In the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus was selecting disciples to be his closest followers. It was customary among Jewish rabbis that potential disciples applied to become part of the group surrounding a teacher. Perhaps they bartered a price for the experience. Jesus, however, selected those in whom He had recognized the potential to share His mission. We find him selecting two men from the Galilean villages of Bethsaida and Cana. Phillip responded to the invitation of Jesus that defined their relationship as a journey with the imperative that Phillip come after Jesus. This is what being a disciple is all about. The journey behind Him defines what it means to learn from Jesus and to act as He did. Phillip seems to have been ready to respond instantly.

Nathaniel was another story. When he learned Jesus was from Nazareth, he gave a clearly negative reaction. "Out of Nazareth? You have to be kidding! I know that town...I know its streets like the back of my hand. I grew up only three and a half miles from there. There is no way a Messiah could come from that kind of place. It is not in Nazareth to produce something heroic or beautiful" (Claypool, "Surprise Is God's Other Name," Northminster Sermons, 12/3/1978). Nathaniel was reflecting his personal expectations. When Jesus, however, described having seen him in the classic position of studying the scriptures (under the fig tree), Nathaniel had a change of heart. He recognized that Jesus was God's awaited messenger. Nathaniel realized that something good did come from the unexpected source in an unexpected way.

Just as Nathaniel's expectations governed what he was willing to see in Jesus and the expectations that Samuel would just remain a caretaker at the Tabernacle governed what even Eli assumed for him,

our experiences are often also governed by what we are willing to expect. I realize that you are a rare church. In the past half century you have only experienced one other interim pastor. That kind of stability is so rare among Baptists that you need to celebrate the care with which you have built relationships between clergy and laity here. At the same time, there are twin temptations to interim work. My temptation will be just to come and preach old sermons to you. After all, I probably have at least two or three good ones in my files. Yet, I believe God expects more than that of me. The second temptation is one that will come to you. "This is only an interim time, so I'll take a little rest. Then I'll get back in the swing when the new pastor arrives."

From my experience as a pastor, I realize that much of what I was able to do in the first two years with a church was rooted in what had happened during the interim. You did the difficult work of an intentional interim last time, but that doesn't mean that this time we can all relax. Rather, it's time to explore together how God wants to use this time to build His kingdom through the work of Hampton Baptist Church. There are challenges that we will need to face together, and ultimately you are preparing for how to build on the strengths of this church for the future. It is my prayer that I can contribute to where you are headed for the future. That means asking the question, "Can anything good come out of this time?" I am convinced that it can.

I. If we are to share in all God is ready to do, we need to live expecting God to do amazing things in unexpected places. John Claypool has written, "When you come in contact with the God depicted in the Bible, you might as well get ready for surprises, because the truth of the matter is, His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts" (ibid.).

Perhaps Nathaniel was thinking of the prophecies that the Messiah would come from the line of King David. That had to mean the Messiah would come from Bethlehem or Jerusalem, not some obscure village in Galilee like his own village. Maybe his thoughts were that the Messiah had to come from the finest situations—the best families in the land with all the advantages that could be offered God's Anointed One. A little obscure village like Nazareth could not possibly be the place where God would work. Put in modern terms, to open himself to what God might be doing in Jesus demanded "a paradigm shift," a whole new way of looking at what God might do.

I have been listening to the people with whom I have had contacts already here, and I sense two conflicting sets of expectations. One of them is a very optimistic mindset believing that God has placed this congregation at a unique position in Hampton and given us a challenge of ministry, outreach, and a chance to do church with a flair of excellence. There are folks who want to reach out to the people who live in this area, to the military population, and to those who appreciate the best in church music. At the same time, I am also hearing another group in the church family who believe this is a time for the church to pull back from being bold. They see the cracks in the plaster and the things that need updating in the physical plant as difficulties that may not be overcome. These folks remember when both morning services were filled, when this church was the place to be, and they grieve over the losses of the past few years. Fear has become the lifestyle. They are the ones who see every death of a faithful member as a deep loss and wonder if we can find those who will replace them. You have a great history, and I confess that I am new to all that is facing you. However, I believe the future is positive, not because I know all the challenges, but because I have experienced the positive work of God. We need to expect him to act in unexpected places.

II. We need to live expecting God to work from unexpected sources. As I read the church's online history, I began to see how God was working in unexpected ways. You had 200 baptisms in 1805 as the result of one period of revival. In 1849, over 200 baptisms occurred. While the church and the city of Hampton were burned to keep the city from falling into Union hands during the Civil War, the congregation recovered and built this place of worship in 1883, a legacy of moving out of the ashes toward new heights. Between 1925 and 2001, you were blessed with the stability of having only two pastors, both of whom retired from ministry at this place. It's often hard for a

church to live in the shadow of such grand times and to continue moving forward. As I have been listening, I hear a hopefulness that you are ready to move onward. The great legacy is a challenge to allow God to work in the unexpected ways.

I confess to you that the future is probably not going to look like the past. My wife and I have a 25-year-old son who is teaching me the thought patterns of the millennial generation. They are not interested in recreating the church of our grandfathers, but they have a missional commitment that puts my generation to shame. They expect the church to do what it does with excellence whether that is in Christian education, music, preaching, or in missions. While some favor contemporary music, liturgical worship and classical music has a strong appeal among this group, and many of them like both styles. If anything, I fear that our greatest mistake as churches has been asking too little of the oncoming generation, not in asking too much. What are we expecting from God in our current generation? I believe it's time to expect God to work from unexpected sources.

III. As we look to the future, we need to be prepared for God to act in unexpected ways. You are getting ready for a capital campaign. I confess that I am not up to date on all that is being planned, but I am thrilled you have not put this on hold. You have a vision that is driving the church forward.

The invitation from Phillip to Nathaniel was simply, "Come and see" (v. 46b). Nathaniel came and heard Jesus and knew that Jesus was indeed the promised one. Jesus made him a strange promise of the glory that Nathaniel would experience. "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (v. 51 NRSV). The experience of God's presence would be greater than anything Nathaniel might dream. Jacob's dream when fleeing his brother would be nothing compared to what he would experience with Jesus.

I believe that God has some great things in store for this church and for us. It is exciting to join the stream of God at work here. God has his hand on this congregation. I believe God can do great things in this interim time, and it has nothing to do with me being here. It has everything to do with God who is at work in your midst. I dare to cast my lot with those who believe God can do more than we ever expect.

### Conclusion

Bill Hybels, Pastor of Willow Creek Church near Chicago commented: "If you bring a thimble to God, he'll fill it. If you bring a bucket to God, he'll fill that. If you bring a fifty-gallon barrel to God, he'll fill that, too. Which best describes your expectations of God? A thimble, a bucket, or a barrel?"

Too Busy Not to Pray, Bill Hybels, 1988, p. 89).