

It's been at least half a dozen years now since this church dealt with ongoing consternation about our "traditional" Christmas Eve services. It got to the point where I just dreaded Christmas Eve. We tried everything—switching the time, having two services instead of one, going back to having one service, adjusting the order of worship, having more soloists, having no soloists, doing a service of Lessons and Carols (if it works for the Archbishop of Canterbury, shouldn't it work for me) . . . no matter what we tried, it just didn't seem to work and people expressed their discontent. I started fantasizing about getting sick on Christmas Eve and just leaving Jonah to deal with the whole kerfuffle.

In retrospect, I see that those "traditional" Christmas Eve services weren't the issue—each service was thoughtfully prepared, carefully executed, and lovingly offered up offer to God. The issue was the expectations we all brought with us to the services because of what we called it—"traditional." We came expecting a "traditional" service but that word is meaningless in a place like this—a church made up of people from vastly different religious traditions, backgrounds, and experiences. A Christmas Eve service that was traditional for me would likely only seem traditional to others who attended Christmas Eve services at St. John's United Church of Christ in Archbold, Ohio between 1978 and 1993. But, I'm the only one in this congregation who fits that description. Not only that, as Congregationalists, we are part of what is called the free-church tradition—as such we don't have a book of worship or book of prayer that dictates the contents of our worship services. Those of you who have, in the past, been part of churches who do abide by such worship guides would be hard pressed to find any kind of a service here that feels traditional. Not only that, but we are a church located in a region that is increasingly a destination for retirees. That means our population is somewhat transient—most of us are from other places and, if there even was such a thing as a "traditional" Suttons Bay Congregational Church Christmas Eve service, a lot of us wouldn't recognize it as such because we haven't been around long enough to figure out what "traditional" even means here.

Indeed, after a few years of church staff members knocking themselves out to create a "traditional" Christmas Eve service, the deacons had a conversation during which we finally figured out what was happening. As I said, the problem wasn't the services, the problem was that word we were using to describe them. As soon as we dropped the word "traditional" the issues essentially just went away because we were able to free ourselves from all of the expectations the word engenders. I wish we would have figured it out sooner because those services included a lot of potentially meaningful experiences. But, because we were trying to get the service to match our definition of what a "traditional" Christmas Eve service is, we missed out on those meaningful experiences because we were too locked into our own expectations of what should be happening, instead of embracing what was actually happening.

Because that's what expectations do—they lead us to miss out on what actually is because we are too focused on what we think should be. I've heard expectations called preconceived disappointments or premeditated resentments and boy oh wow isn't that the truth.

Author and certified life transition coach Muriel Berard writes . . . "Expectation is defined . . . as a strong belief that something will happen or be the case; or a belief that someone will or should achieve something. An expectation has a success or failure attached to it depending upon whether that expectation is realized. . . When

expecting something, we have already created a narrative about the result . . . ‘how it should/must/have to be’ and consciously or not, we are expecting that story to unfold.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s pause to think about that for a moment . . . “An expectation has a success or failure attached to it depending upon whether that expectation is realized . . .” Every Christmas Eve service was a failure because of the expectation set-up that it was going to be “traditional.” When we removed the label it opened us up to new opportunities to worship and relish in the hope, peace, joy, and love of the birth of Christ.

Indeed, this time of the year is rife with expectations, not just of worship services but of parties, holiday meals, gift exchanges . . . just about everything has extra expectations attached to it during this most wonderful time of the year. Just this past week our own Len Niehoff posted on Facebook . . . “The holidays are full of so many unreasonable expectations. For example, why must we jingle ALL the way? I think there’s no shame in jingling just PART of the way if that’s the best you can do.” And Len, I get it. Some days just a single jingle in this season of ol’ Kris Kringle feels like a real accomplishment. All of the expectations cause stress and pressure, resentment and disappointment, and, of special note during the holidays, all of the high expectations about what this season should be cause us to miss out on so much of the wonder and beauty of what it actually is.

And we’re not alone. Christmas celebrations haven’t been meeting peoples’ high expectations since, well, since the birth of Christ, the very reason for the season. The Messiah born a long time ago in Bethlehem did not meet expectations of what a Messiah should be. In this morning’s prophecy about the Messiah, just one of dozens of scriptures that set-up expectations about the Messiah in the Old Testament, Isaiah declares “He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.” And yet, what kind of a baby comes “with vengeance, with terrible recompense?” Surely not our sweet little Jesus boy, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Or, perhaps even more disturbing, what kind of a Messiah—which means “the promised deliverer”—what kind of a Messiah dies on the cross, that old symbol of suffering and shame. This was NOT the Messiah they were expecting, this was not a mighty military leader and cultural hero—the lions were not lying down with the lambs, the waters were not breaking forth in the wilderness, and the Romans were not being obliterated and leaving the people alone to enjoy peace and prosperity in the Promised Land.

But there were others who did recognize that this Jesus of Nazareth delivered on the promises of God in a different kind of way . . . he brought hope to the despairing, peace to the troubled, joy to the suffering, and love to all he encountered. While he might not have met their expectations of a Messiah, he certainly did deliver them into a new way of living, a way of living based on love.

We can’t know what DID make some people believe but I do think it’s fair to say that the high expectations surrounding what the Messiah was to be and do are what stood in the way of believing that Jesus was the Messiah for a lot of the people. The Messiah wasn’t embraced as such because he didn’t fulfill the expectations had of him.

Again, because that’s what expectations do. They cause us to miss out on what is because we get so wrapped up in what we think should be. And perhaps it’s expectations that keep us from experiencing the Christ among us even here and even now, our high expectations of celebrations, gift-giving, warm and fuzzy feelings, etc. that hold us back from knowing the hope, peace, joy, and love of Advent and Christmas.

So what are we to do in this season of high-expectations? The antidote is replacing our expectations with intentions. While an expectation says, “You, they, this, or that will *be* this or *do* that”, an intention says “I will . . .” An expectation is external, its success or failure depends on other people and things that are usually out of our control. That’s why expectations so often go unfulfilled. But, an intention is internal, it’s about how we decide we are going to be in the world and how we are going to respond to the world around us. “I am going to find joy in this day.” “I am going to enjoy whatever time I do get to spend with my family this Christmas.” “I

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coachcampus.com/coach-portfolios/power-tools/muriel-berard-power-tool-intention-vs-expectation/>

am going to be grateful for this opportunity to worship.” “I am going to find Christ, not just in a manger, but in the people I meet today.” “I am going to do something that brings me joy today.”

Expectations steal our joy, set others up for failure, and are the reason we miss out on so much of the abundance of life Christ brings. What to expect when you're expecting? Disappointment and resentment. We avoid those disappointments and resentments and lean into the presence of the Christ within and around us when we claim our intentions--the intentions that give us freedom from expectations, direction in life, and agency over how we will experience the Christmas season this year. I will be hopeful. I will be peaceful. I will be joyful. I will love. Thanks be to God.