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# Resolutions and Expectations

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A Sermon By

The Rev. Amanda A. Akes

The Second Sunday After Christmas

January 3, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

## **Resolutions and Expectations**

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 84:1-6

Luke 2:41-52

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Happy New Year! We are at the very beginning of a fresh, unsullied, brand spanking New Year! 2016 stretches ahead of us clear, bright, and full of possibility. As one year ends and a new one begins, many people make New Year's resolutions. According to the University of Scranton's Journal of Clinical Psychology, about 50% of Americans usually make New Year's resolutions year after year, with another 20% of the country sometimes making resolutions. On average, that's about 3 quarters of the population pledging themselves to new goals in the New Year. Our most common resolutions include aspirations of self-improvement.

The practice of making New Year's resolutions is not a new trend. It dates back at least 4,000 years ago to the Babylonians who made promises to their gods at the beginning of the New Year. Over time, the focus of New Year's resolutions has shifted. During the reign of Julius Caesar in the Roman Empire, New Year's resolutions took on a moral nature, such as being kind to others. It's not surprising that the tradition of making New Year's resolutions dates so far back. It's human nature to seek improvement. It's in our DNA to want to develop ourselves to the best of our potential so that we get the best out of life. And of course, January is not the only time we do this. We set expectations for ourselves and for others, not only at the beginning of the new calendar year, but continually throughout the year. Expectations, resolutions, goals – these are all good things. They are worthy objectives. But, what happens when our expectations don't turn out the way we hoped they would? What happens when we fall short of our expectations or when other people fall short them?

Today's gospel is ripe with stories of expectation including Mary and Joseph's expectations of Jesus, Jesus' expectations of his parents, and Jesus' expectation of himself. Luke vividly

sets the stage for his audience, in this, the only incident in our canonical gospels about Jesus' childhood.

Our story opens with twelve-year-old Jesus and his parents who had traveled to Jerusalem for the religious festival of Passover. Luke indicates that this was a yearly pilgrimage for the family and that it was undertaken with relatives and friends. The trek from the family's hometown of Nazareth would have taken at least five days on foot if the roads were dry and easy to navigate. It was probably a journey that the pre-teen Jesus had become accustomed to making.

After the Passover celebrations concluded in Jerusalem, the Jewish families who had undertaken the pilgrimage returned to their homes, Mary and Joseph among them. Mary and Joseph, though they did not see their son, trusted that he was somewhere in the family caravan. You see, they had expectations of him. They expected that he would accompany the family back home, as he always did. They expected that he would honor and obey his parents as the Law commanded. They did not expect that he would have remained in the big city after the festivities and they certainly didn't expect to find their son in the Temple interacting with religious scholars. Jesus, whether he had meant to or not, had defied his parents' expectations.

When Mary expressed that very sentiment to Jesus upon finally finding him, Jesus' reaction to her concern is different than we might expect. We may imagine that a twelve-year-old boy guilty of wrongdoing and duly reprimanded by his parents would be penitent. But, instead of a contrite Jesus, we see a surprised Jesus. Jesus clearly expected his parents to know that he would be in the Temple, or as he put it, "in his Father's house." We hear in this story, for the first time, Jesus stating his understanding that he has a special relationship with God. And we hear that Jesus obviously expected Mary and Joseph to have been aware of that fact too. Jesus is not the only one who falls short of expectations in this gospel passage. Mary and Joseph fall short of Jesus' expectations. At least that's what it sounds like from Jesus' response to Mary.

Perhaps we can empathize with this scenario. Like the holy family, we too have expectations, both of ourselves and of people close to us. Sometimes people fall short of our expectations

and other times, our expectations are blown out of the water. Mary and Joseph's expectations of Jesus were challenged in a new way when they found their son in the Temple and he voiced his peculiar response to Mary's reproach. Jesus' expectations of his parents were challenged too. He expected them to know his special relationship with God would warrant his interest in the Temple where God's presence was understood to dwell. Their lack of understanding was a surprise to their son.

Failed expectations are a constant in life. That University of Scranton's Journal of Clinical Psychology report on New Year's resolutions found that only about 8% of people keep the New Year's resolutions they made. Even with the best of intentions, sometimes we fall short. We fail to keep our expectations of ourselves or to meet other people's expectations of us. When this happens, we can draw strength from the interaction between the holy family after their expectations of one another are challenged and shifted.

Luke tells us that Jesus leaves the Temple, returning home with his parents, and that he was obedient to them. In this action, I see Jesus rethinking his expectations of his relationship with his parents. Instead of exerting the authority of his special relationship with God, that he is clearly beginning to live into, Jesus submits himself to his parents. He shifts the way he interacts with them and in doing so, we hear that he grows in wisdom, years, and favor. His parents, exemplified here by Mary, "treasured these things in her heart." This verse tells us that Mary was a person of reflection who when faced with actions she did not understand, contemplated them within her heart.

In this New Year, when your expectations, resolutions, and hopes are challenged, I invite you to remember this story of Jesus and his parents. We are called, like Jesus, to be flexible and gentle with people's expectations. We are called, like Mary, to reflect, contemplate, and assess our expectations and experiences. And like both of them, we are called to engage and address our loved ones when we scare, surprise, and frustrate one another all the while embracing what we believe God is calling us towards. 2016 is a new year full of hope and promise. May you feel God's presence in the midst of all your expectations and may you recognize this presence even when your expectations are challenged. Amen.