



# THE CALL

ST. ANDREW'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
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## Christmas Expectations



The Rev. Adrian Robbins-Cole

*Blessed is he who expects nothing,  
for he shall never be disappointed.*

LOVE THIS QUOTATION by the 18th century English satirical poet and wit Alexander Pope. I am sure that Ebenezer Scrooge would have heartily agreed with Pope's sentiment in regard to Christmas expectations which is the theme of this Christmas edition of the Call.

Just think about the carols we so love to sing at Christmastime. They are replete with the most glorious expectations and visions for us and this life. Let's look at some of some of the sentiments expressed in some of the beloved carols sung at our Christmas services.

We always end our Christmas services with the carol *Joy to the*

*world* and we sing the Savior comes to "make his blessings flow" and to prove the "wonders of his love." Or, in *It came upon the midnight clear*, we sing about "Peace on earth and good will to men, from heaven's all gracious King" and "when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling." One of my favorite Christmas carols is *God rest you merry gentlemen*, and in it we sing "God rest you merry gentleman, let nothing you dismay" and that Christ is born "to free all those who trust in him from Satan's power and might" and that "true love and charity each other now embrace."

With these lofty sentiments some might argue that we are setting up ourselves for disappointment. And indeed, if you read about the psychology of expectation, you will find many a dry article warning against having high or unrealistic expectations because they will just result in disappointment. And undoubtedly there can be truth to this as many of us can attest from personal experience.

An article in the journal *Psychology Today* says that expectations can result in disappointment if we expect something to happen without good reason. For example, we don't take the necessary steps for that thing to happen because it may involve

unrealistic expectations about the way other people will behave.

So, should we just say "Bah, humbug!" and join Scrooge in dismissing the expectations of Christmas? I say, "By no means!" For when we sing our beloved carols expressing the Christmas hope of peace, joy, and goodwill, we simultaneously experience the voice of God speaking to us, reminding us that we are made in the image of God. This means we can legitimately aspire to be the very best versions of ourselves embodying peace, love, and goodwill to the world. With God's grace we can walk in the way of Christ whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

And while some strands of psychology warn against having expectations, there are other strands of psychology which would strongly support a Christian vision of the importance of having high expectations about who we can aspire to be.

As Stephen R. Covey, the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has written, "Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be."

An article on the *Human Psychology* website argues that our expectations, whether they be high or low, help shape and determine our reality. Research demonstrates that the

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expectations we have for ourselves and for other people can have a significant impact on human behavior. If we have no expectations for ourselves and others, we will meet those expectations. But when we have high expectations of who we can become and what we can achieve, we can rise to the occasion.

This means at Christmas when we sing in our carols about the birth of Christ bringing peace and goodwill, joy and love, it shapes our behavior and encourages us to be the best version of ourselves reflecting God's hope and expectations for us. It is not just wishful thinking or sentimentality, but it is based on God's insight as our Creator about our potential to be Christ-like.

This Christmas let us sing our carols with joy and open-heartedness in the expectation that we will be transformed!

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come:  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature  
sing.*

I wish you and your loved ones  
a very Happy Christmas,

Yours in Christ,



## Warden's Message



Will Nystrom, warden

**H**APPY ADVENT! I've been reflecting on the fact that our beloved church magazine "The Call," is the call to follow Jesus Christ. And I began thinking that the first people to get that call must have been those who followed the North Star to visit a tiny baby in a humble manger, who was none other than God himself. He became human to teach us how to accept his call to love God and love our neighbors. And then I

was thinking about the very first steps these people, the Magi took in the direction of the star, and I imagine the star beams were like outstretched arms calling the Magi in its direction. And when they took those first steps, I think their very first emotion must have been of hope. Hope for a new life. Hope for a new direction. Hope for purpose and hope for God's love.

Were those first steps taken in trepidation? Did the Magi doubt their trip? I don't think so. Matthew states of the Magi: "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." No question. No fear. They took the first step in God's direction in the hope of salvation. And they even found the time to bring gifts!

So what's the first step we can take during this beautiful Christmas season toward the North Star? Towards Christ? One answer has to be that we boldly love. One of my favorite phrases is "your heart



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**PARISH OFFICE:** 79 Denton Road,  
Wellesley, MA 02482-6404  
781.235.7310 | FAX: 781.235.0067  
standrewswellesley.org

**PUBLISHER:** Dan Dent  
**EDITOR:** Katharine Clark,  
Parish Administrator  
kate@standrewswellesley.org

speaks and you don't think." And basically, the thought here is that as humans we always know by that first impulse what the right thing to do is, but then our brain gets in the

way with all sorts of justifications that sow doubt or slow us down. Sounds to me like that first impulse is God's presence in our lives.

So let your heart speak this Advent. Boldly love. Take the first step toward the star. And more than anything else, have an amazing Christmas!



Photo: Peter B. Lull

## What to Expect from "Expectation"



The Rev. Margaret K. Schwarzer

**L**IKE MOST OF US, my expectations of life have been shaken since the 2020 COVID pandemic, the political turbulence in our nation and the sudden invasion of Ukraine this past spring. Just when I think we are emerging from the pandemic, or ready for a "normal" year, something else happens. Global health, financial recovery and political calm have been elusive. The past three years

have taught me that human beings aren't very good at knowing what is coming next.

While this is disappointing for those of us who grew up with a New England "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" orientation, there is a hidden gift. The past three years have taught me to have expectations, but to carry them lightly. I've learned to embrace the gifts of the present and to live in the present more intentionally. I have hopes and expectations for myself, my son, my stepchildren, the world, but I don't count on them happening, or happening exactly as I would like.

Now, my expectations are tempered by the wildness of the world and my confidence in God's love for the world, including my family and myself. I know with even greater certainty that prayer is never wasted, that God is steadfast, and that chaos can be mitigated by the love and skill of human beings. Chaos can morph into something

else when human skill and God's unyielding presence are engaged.

When I turn to saints and mystics for perspective, one voice has been compelling. Julian of Norwich, a remarkable mystic of the 14th century, has said two

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Photo: Chris Dorney, Adobe Images

Julian of Norwich, Norwich Cathedral

## What to Expect from “Expectations” *continued*

wise things about how to live with expectations without being driven or flattened by them.

First, Julian wrote, “The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything. God is the ground, the substance, the teaching, the teacher, the purpose, and the reward for which every soul labors.” In other words, if I think I have missed it, I may have missed what I was expecting, but I haven’t missed what God wants to give me. The path will still be rich if I have eyes to see it.

She also wrote, “Be a gardener. Dig a ditch. Toil and sweat. And turn the earth upside down. And seek the deepness. And water

plants in time. Continue this labor. And make sweet floods to run, and noble and abundant fruits to spring. Take this food and drink and carry it to God as your true worship.”

Julian lived during the time of the plague, a time when many were confused and desperate. Her solution was to invite everyone to be earthy, human people, growing crops, bringing food out of the earth, being a helper at a human scale when the world needed help. Across the centuries, I hear her inviting us to continue to do our part, to do the labor assigned to us, to stay curious about what is com-

ing next. To carry our expectations lightly.

In this season of Advent and Christmas, I am focusing on the gifts of love and community in my life, the joy of seeing my son, stepchildren, family, and friends. The opportunity to seek out gifts that might help them feel “seen” and loved, the chance to feast together. In short, I expect to cultivate a thankful heart, one of the fruits of the season of Advent. I’m praying that all of us at St. Andrew’s can find ourselves with a thankful heart in these holy days—whether the world is calm or churning.



Photo: Peter B. Lull

# Unanswered Prayers



The Rev. Sarah Robbins-Cole

**E**XPECTATION is a mixed-bag. In some ways expectation is a good thing. A friend told me recently that a flea in the wild can jump 13 inches horizontally and seven inches vertically. Apparently, if you compared this feat to humans, it would be equivalent to jumping 250 feet into the air and 450 inches horizontally. However, when fleas are placed in a glass jar, they will attempt to escape, but when a lid is placed on the top of the jar, they soon learn that their jumping is useless and will stop trying. After three days in a capped jar, when the fleas are released, they will no longer be able to jump as they could before the experiment.

There seems to be a number of articles on the internet that attest to the truth of this flea anecdote, but even if it were not true, the story as a metaphor rings true to our experience. Our expectations create powerful limits. High expectations can help us attempt and achieve things that we would otherwise think were beyond our abilities.

On the other hand, Brené Brown, in her book, *Atlas of the Heart*, writes about the problematic nature of expectation that can lead to profound disappointment. She writes, "When we develop expectations, we paint in our head how things are going to be and how they're going to look." The problem with expectations is that

they often involve others over whom we have no control. We can never fully know how other people will behave, participate, think, respond, or react. When people fail to deliver on our expectations, we can be angry and hurt. Brown also points out that our "stealth" expectations are particularly problematic because sometimes we do not even realize that we have expectations.

As a parent, I have tried to help my children manage expectations in a number of ways. First, I have asked them to be honest with me about what they want to do. In other words, I have asked them to be honest and open about their expectations, and I promise them that I will be honest about mine, too. One of my least favorite activities is being in the position of trying to guess what another person's expectation is of me. I would prefer they tell me clearly.

The second teaching, when they have experienced disappointment in their life, I tell them, "Man's rejection is God's protection." It's a little corny but it has worked for me, and I dare say for my children as well. When opportunities do not come to fruition, I am confident that there are better options that will open up.

The third teaching comes from the psychologist and professor Sonja Lyubomirsky. In her book, *The How of Happiness* (2006), she attributes the tenfold rise in depression among the general population over the last century to our unrealistic expectations. She writes, "Our expectations about what our lives should be like are greater than ever before; we believe that we can do anything, and we are profoundly disappointed

when reality doesn't meet or even come close to perfection." She also attributes the mental health crisis to the loss of a sense of community, belonging, and connection. I try to encourage my children to realize that happiness does not derive from attaining the best, but by living virtuously and kindly.

So, this Advent, I invite you to reflect on your past. Ask yourself where things did not go as you had hoped, and yet, there were so many consequent blessings that unfolded for you as a result of those disappointments. Or just listen to Garth Brooks, who puts it better than I can in his "[I thank God for] Unanswered Prayers."



Photo: Peter B. Lull

# Parishioner Reflections

**T**HIS ADVENT, OUR FELLOW PARISHIONERS offer reflections on two very seasonal ideas, those of hope and expectation. The holiday, which gets its name from the Latin word for “arrival”, serves as a countdown to

## Anna Lee Wahls



LIKE MANY OF US, I cherish seeing the preparations and traditions of the Advent season through the eyes of my children. When we first joined St. Andrew’s, they were both very young, and one of their favorite church events was the Little Angels’ Gift Shop. They took so much pride in carefully selecting gifts for everyone in our family and they could not contain their delight when we opened

Christmas. Advent is also a season that reminds us of what it is to wait hopefully for that which is promised but not yet fully formed. Expectation and hope. We hope you enjoy these reflections.

them on Christmas. There is so much hope and promise in the act of gift giving.

I am fortunate to get to engage with many of our youngest parishioners as a church school teacher. I am delighted that they will have the opportunity to shop for their loved ones once again at this year’s Little Angels’ Gift Shop. Seeing the generosity and excitement in the young children of St. Andrew’s fills me with hope for the future of our church, our community, and the world.

## Joe Hamilton



ADVENT and the Christmas season have held many meanings for our family, some joyful, some sad, some apprehensive. Growing up, it was always a time of festivity and happiness, admittedly more secular than religious, but all culminating in Christmas Eve and Christmas, celebrating “the Word made flesh,” and the renewal of hope in the world.

With our own family, we’ve worked to replicate some of that same spirit of generosity and cheer, hoping to add a little more of the spiritual, participating in church pageants, services, and celebrating the story

of the coming of Jesus alongside Christmas trees and Santa Claus.

We have experienced joyful events during the season—the birth of our son Ted; sorrowful ones—the death of my mother; melancholy but special moments—my mother enjoying her last Christmas with her first grandchild, our daughter Lydia; anxious times—preparing for two moves, one overseas, immediately following the holiday; and happy times—the first Christmas of our first grandchild, Finn.

For us, Advent has indeed been a season of great happiness and sometimes, sadness, often one of expectation, renewal and change. The Advent and Christmas message of hope and a better world was always with us.

## Pam Kubbins



SO MUCH SYNCHRONICITY in being invited to write about hope during this beautiful Advent season leading to the winter solstice! For the past two years, I have been ruminating on the meaning of hope and asking my friends and family about that word and what it means to them. When I say that I believe that hope can set us up for suffering, it always prompts a lot of soul searching and vigorous conversation.

Hope springs eternal. My favorite definition of hope is: desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment (Merriam-Webster, definition #2).

Ultimately, it is unrealistic to hope and expect that there will be joy without pain. But similarly, it is unrealistic to worry and dread that there will be nothing but tragedy or sorrow. What is left is living and breathing in the present moment. And with each breath, we can deal with what is in front of us.

Whether we are experiencing joy or suffering, we can give love and compassion to ourselves and send it out the whole world. In any moment of sorrow, we can expect to turn our faces to the sun or light a candle just as we do on the Advent wreath during the darkest day of the year.

## Ellen Stalein



I RECENTLY SHARED with a friend that throughout my husband's final illness I lived with the mantra, "Dear God, give me grace."

She then asked, "What is grace?"

I answered, "Grace gives you courage, but it's more than that."

Dissatisfied with my answer, I pondered the question.

I realize that grace is a spiritual gift that not only helps us do what is right or what is necessary, but it is a spiritual gift that opens us up to our relationship with God.

My favorite gospel is the road to Emmaus with its message that God is with us even when we are unaware (Luke 24:13-35). To ask for grace awakens us to God's presence and is the source of hope and courage to face whatever challenges lie before us.

## Betsy Millane



HOPE CAN MAKE FOOLS of us all. I know this. I have felt like a fool for years. Hoping. But faith was there, too. You know faith. One of the favorite three: Faith, Love, Hope.

You see, I wrote a book. It's a good story. Unique. I love this

book. Writing classes, which I took in abundance to develop a marketable book, were a challenge. In every workshop, I had to read a chapter aloud and then I was required to listen, to absorb the comments, never object while a table full of published writers criticized it. After the criticism sunk in, I rewrote it again and again. The novel improved, every week. Soon I felt confident enough to send queries to agents and editors, in the hope the book would find a publishing home.

The publishing world was having none of it. Rejections were constant. I continued to revise the book based on the feedback I received. Against all reason, hope was resurrected every time the book went out, and hope jeered at me every time a rejection was issued.

Years passed. Finally, I found myself berating myself for failing. Hope made a mockery of me, a mockery of

my prayers. I felt foolish to believe in the book and to have faith it would be published. I told myself to give it up. The book would not be published. Get over it. Get real. The Universe had spoken. But faith was determined. It hung in there with me, it didn't mock me during my conversations with God when I asked for guidance for a sign. I might have felt like an idiot hoping, but there was nothing shameful about faith, and it refused to fade. Faith became the blind man to hope's wide-open eyes. Maybe it saw something that hope never would.

Then my agent called to tell me he had found a publishing house for the book. Hope cheered, and Faith sat back, saying, "I told you so." Faith had walked beside me, obviously carrying hope for me, when I was too bruised and ashamed to, and it has prevailed.

I thanked God for it all: For making me mock myself. For giving me a fool's identity, and for liberating me. I now see the chain: Love for the book created faith, and faith held the hand of hope. I can't wait to do it all again.

My book, based on my family's experiences in the Dutch Underground during World War II, will be published in June 2023.

## St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Officers, and Staff

**Warden** Will Nystrom wardens@standrewswellesley.org

**Warden** Megan Burns wardens@standrewswellesley.org

**Treasurer** Harry Condon treas@standrewswellesley.org

**Clerk** Peter Lull clerk@standrewswellesley.org

**Rector** Rev. Adrian Robbins-Cole adrian@standrewswellesley.org

**Associate Rector for Adult Formation and Membership**

Rev. Margaret Schwarzer margaret@standrewswellesley.org

**Interim Associate Rector for Youth and Families**

Rev. Sarah Robbins-Cole sarah@standrewswellesley.org

**Parish Administrator** Katharine Clark kate@standrewswellesley.org

**Pastoral Associate** Rev. Karen Vickers Budney revkar7@comcast.net

**Music Minister** Helen Ward Mannix wardie@standrewswellesley.org

**Financial Administrator** Joanne Butler joanne@standrewswellesley.org

**Christian Learning Coordinator**

Susan Jackson susan@standrewswellesley.org

**Youth Music Director** Ciara Celli ciara@standrewswellesley.org

**Sexton** Stephen F. Killeen steve@standrewswellesley.org

**Assistant Sexton** William Clover



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