

## Senior Sermon

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I expected yesterday to be a fairly typical Saturday for me. I would work on homework, catch up on sleep, and hang out with my friends. I ended up milking a goat at 9 am, something I had never done before. While I work on a farm and we do have goats, those goats have never had kids and they are around 10 years old, so milking was not on my agenda. My job in the milking process was to hold the goat still against a fence, this goat being eighty pounds and not wanting to be there, giving me quite some bruises on my arms and a ruined pair of jeans. It was not an experience I anticipated for yesterday, for my high school experience or even really in my life. This event, however, was fairly minor, it didn't throw off my schedule or deprive me of anything, it just gave me a workout and made me take an extra shower. But it was one in a long series of incidents throughout my high school career that has shaped me precisely because I did not expect them to happen. There have been events that have taught me things about myself and events that have taught me about my faith.

Many stories throughout the Bible hinge on the unexpected happening, often in the form of miracles. It solidifies people's faith in God and Jesus throughout both testaments, proving that they can do things no normal human could. Having taught Sunday school to 6-year-olds for the past four years, I often only think of stories in the simplest of forms. So this reading is simply, that after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples set out to do their daily work and instead they witnessed their lord. This gave them the strength and the hope to reaffirm their faith. The unexpected happening is what allowed them to continue to spread God's word and to grow as disciples.

I've tried to let the unexpected happen in my life, in order to explore my faith and to grow like Simon and the other disciples. Our yearly mission trip is a great example of a time where it's important not to have expectations of what's going to transpire. I had heard stories from my siblings, from my friends, and they try to prepare you well for the trip before we leave. But you can never be prepared for what will happen during those five days in D.C. I didn't go on the trip until my junior year, so most of my peers had already gone once, if not twice, and they all seemed so much more confident as we walked around the city and met new people. Being a naturally introverted person, it took a lot my first year to talk to people and I often only would relax in the encounters when there was a more gregarious person to carry the weight of the conversation. Not knowing how I would respond to events and people throughout the trip freed me up to focus on that moment. Since I couldn't know what would happen the next day, I had to try my best to experience that day as it happened. That's the beauty of that trip, it's what allows so many moments to transpire that permanently shape our faith.

Last year the most poignant moment for me took place on the last day of the trip on our free afternoon. That morning we had been planning on going to the zoo, but inspiration struck and a group of us decided to make sandwiches and notes and go to deliver them in a park. That was the first time on the trip where I felt comfortable talking to people even without the protective barrier of my friends being with me. I met a wonderful person who I talked to for quite a while. They were probably similar to the hundreds of other people on the streets, but through talking to them I got a chance to know a person both so similar and so different to me. Through this unexpected decision, I got the confidence and strength to continue to talk to all sorts of people regardless of whether or not there was an obvious commonality.

I expected that I would get to lean on this past knowledge and experience when I attended my second trip. A year later, I had more confidence in myself and was more ready to prompt the conversations and establish my own friendships and similarities with the people we talked to. But this year was almost nothing like last year. We did mostly behind the scenes work at each of the organizations and when we went out at night, the streets were startlingly empty.

At Charlie's Place, an established worksite where many people's favorite interactions took place, we spent a lovely morning organizing a closet. This was a worksite that they had specifically chosen seniors for to give us a good last experience, and our group had to do some serious morale raising. On the surface, it seemed that our job was somewhat pointless. There were such disarray and clothing in that closet was so transitive, barely getting established on the shelves before being given out to the people who dined there. But never before had I felt so inspired to work my hardest and do the best job I could do to help organize that closet. This was due in large part to Ralph Bernabi who took so much gusto in our job, vowing to not only organize that closet for today but to leave a lasting organization that would persist in the months and years to come. He came up with a chart that would allow for quick sorting of men's pants, and a labeling system that would allow for easy access once they were on the shelves. We sorted and redid their entire shoe collection, eliminating all impractical shoes and making way for every person to get the proper boots, sneakers, or formal shoes based on their situation. I felt like our work mattered and it was one of the times when we didn't seem like substitutable volunteers. No other team would have organized that closet in the exact same way, we were doing God's work in a way only we could. So though my hopes for the morning did not get fulfilled, I ended up having a stronger renewal of faith than I was anticipating. These two experiences were very different both from each other and from what I expected. They allowed me to grow in different ways, both inward and outward. My faith in those moments became more central to me being me and showed me that my faith doesn't come from the bible or Sunday school, but the most difficult and most unexpected parts of my life. These would be difficult mostly because of what I expected from my life and where those expectations came from.

Growing up, I had two heroes who I held very close to my heart. I was the type of little kid who preferred to live in her own world rather than attempt to make friends in the realm of elementary school politics. They drew me out of my shell and gave me the confidence to just be myself, teaching me lessons that slowly helped me grow up. One taught me to love reading, how to use my imagination as a tool, and that I never had to blend in if I did not want to. The other showed me the patterns in the world around me, the games I was capable of winning and that my age should never limit my learning. I idolized them and as a kid, they seemed like perfect role models for growing up to be a cool teenager and then a successful adult. My two siblings were the epitome of cool, not because of what I saw on TV, but because of how devoted they were to their kid sister when there were so many better things they could be doing. By the time I was finishing elementary school, they were both winning awards at the state and national levels, being heralded as leaders of their respective schools and seeming to have unlimited friends. So naturally, I tried to be just like them and assumed that thus my high school experience would be equivalent to theirs.

By the time I was in eighth grade and getting ready for high school, I could tell you in detail about how it would go. I knew what classes I would take every year, what clubs I would join and which I would try to do club leadership in, and even who my friends would be. I thought if I had a solid plan and worked hard, high school could not be that hard. After all, I knew what I was doing and I had my two heroes to guide me.

I don't think anyone could have predicted the person I would become throughout high school. I had high expectations for myself, always wanting to do more and make more of a difference. I thought that the harder I pushed myself and the better I did in school, the farther I would get in the end, a lesson drilled into us high schoolers and one I learned my siblings. This worldview creates a very unhealthy attitude towards illness in high school. Being sick seems like the end of the world, with abandoned deadlines, makeup work and missed drama. So when I got sick at the beginning of my second semester freshman year, I was concerned and I had no idea what would come ahead. That simple infection would have effects that are with me now, as I approach the end of my senior year. The biggest one has been chronic headaches, everyday living with some amount pain radiating out from my head, leaving me exhausted and my daily routine disrupted. It made it impossible for me to continue my life as I had been living it and distorted my plan. Every day I had an expectation of what would happen in high school. That I would go to class, do my homework, and talk to my friends. And at first, it did not seem like a catastrophe when I couldn't do these basic tasks, after all, they reset every day. After years, you have to change what you expect in a day. I have learned to rely more on my friends, though I have less of them, and to enjoy things I used to do all the time with renewed energy. I knew I felt better when I went to youth group or when I could work on the farm for the afternoon because there no one had expected me to be anything but myself. No one knew my siblings, no one knew what I had anticipated in high school, and there I could leave a mark and be a leader even when I couldn't go to school or be the student that I had always been. I went back to those first lessons that my siblings had taught me, to keep learning and to stand out, to play games and to use my imagination. That is how I would survive high school, not by having the best grades.

Now I manage my pain, go to school full time, and am going to college next year, but it came at a significant cost. I had to completely change my expectations of who I was and what I would get out of high school, but I know I did well with what I had and that I am a better person for it. It has made me more resilient and stronger but one of the biggest lessons I have learned is that my expectations are not helpful, that they stopped me from being able to adapt and to change, just as my expectations could have hindered my faith and how a belief that life can only be what it is would have stopped the disciples from continuing Jesus's work long after his death. That I can never know the plan that has been set out for me and that the world isn't fixed, that there isn't one way I can contribute or one way I can grow. These are the lessons, I hope to take with me to college next year and to my life beyond, lessons that have come from my faith, my life, and my time in this church.