



“A Sense of Expectation”

John 3:14-21

April 2, 2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

On an evening about two thousand years ago, Jesus was talking with Nicodemus about new birth and God’s Spirit being like an unpredictable wind. If we would have been there, we would have seen the expectancy in His eyes as He talked about God’s love – a love strong enough to lose everything – so that anyone believing would live forever in relationship with God.

For centuries since that moment, there has been a sense of expectancy for God and God’s people. God knew that people would respond to the love and people have responded and have had their lives changed. You and I have had our lives changed by accepting God’s love for us in Christ.

Back in the 40’s, some of you here joined with others and took the risk of starting this congregation. You remember how you shared this community center building with another faith community – one group setting up folding chairs for the first worship service – the second group putting them away after the second service. It was a sense of expectancy that caused our founding group to formally declare themselves a congregation on January 19th, 1947.¹ It was with anticipation of God’s ongoing work that brought Howard Augustine² to be your founding minister with Charles Smith to follow six years later³ who served along side of your own efforts for the span of for twenty years.

Some of you who are charter members still serve and worship here. They are JoAnne and Marty Nelson, Carolyn Burroughs, Robert Shirley and Virginia Deck. You were the risk-takers, the pioneers who were willing to try something new. You were the

¹ The original Session consisted of six members and the board of Deacons also consisted of 6 members. There were originally 104 charter members.

² R.H.M. Augustine

³ in 1953

ones, 53 years ago, who were willing to devote enormous amounts of your energy in taking on something new that was different and that had no guarantees. And throughout these years, the members and the staff of this church family have lived (and will continue to live) with great expectations of God’s work here.

Our past has poured into our present, and flows into our future. Our expectations for the future are based on the integrity of our past and our future holds even more creativity in the use of our resources. This church is growing in its commitment to Christian education and continues to be a center for sharing and learning in this neighborhood. Our future is exciting.

We have been teaching our children that they belong in our worship because they are a part of God’s worshipping community. In some congregations, you know, children have to be dragged to church because they sense that once there, the adults want to “get rid of them.” Our children like to be in church because they know that they are a valued part of the present, and sense that they are part of the future.

Each year we enjoy their Christmas pageants and we recognize that those plays are their present medium of expression. Later, they will be leading us with more sophisticated teaching tools.

We gather together in a number of ways for fellowship, worship and learning. The Jet Club, the Women’s Association, the Nutrition program (which crosses a number of denominational lines). Our Sunday School program, the VBS and the ministry of our Elders and Deacons. The regular work of those who clean, watch and maintain the property here is nothing less than noble acts of personal worship and sacrifice to God. Our AA groups serve this area with their 12-step therapy approaches.

All of these avenues of coming together are a natural outgrowth of our history as a caring and community-centered congregation. In our many gatherings, we have been showing a responsiveness to individual need and a healthy desire for a good time.

Our work with our youth groups is providing opportunities for our kids to gather and have shared experiences with their peers from here and other congregations. The future for our youth seems bright because we are gradually helping them get in touch with their own abilities by being as present in their lives to the extent that time and resources permit. We aim to equip them with the skills necessary for intelligently integrating their faith into their daily lives in the years ahead. There is nothing that our kids can't discuss or issues with which we won't help them. Those who are involved know the preciousness of the fleeting weeks and months before they move on out of this harbor for open waters where they must navigate for themselves.

We are intentionally working to provide the programs and the experiences that will make this church a lighthouse of values to which we hope young adults will relate for the rest of their lives. We know they are going to do some traveling in the months and years ahead, not only physically but also in their minds – as they construct a world view of their own. But most importantly, they will be doing it having had experiences with our people here who have tried to be present in their lives – being the church to them wherever they are in their spiritual pilgrimage. They will never forget those shared moments of laughter, seriousness and time simply shared together.

I have continued to be impressed, in every sense of that word, with the leadership of this church. The elders and deacons have been making informed decisions – balancing their compassion for individuals' needs with their Christian priorities, as well as a healthy and realistic mindfulness of the availability of skills, time and financial resources. With their membership care lists, the elders and deacons are making sincere efforts to be more involved in the lives of our church family – trying to

keep our communication as high as possible in this Christian community gathered as volunteers.

Sometimes the elders and deacons have a lonely job. They stay late at night for meetings where they are doing the hard work of hearing yet one more opinion and one more idea. I see them continually trying their best to work toward consensus and make the compromises and the occasionally hard decisions on your behalf – knowing that most people will never know the kinds of hours they've put into working some things through. They know, in the midst of the difficult decisions, that someone has to make them and they also know that they only hear the complaints and the murmurs of dissatisfaction on the part of those who are not involved. Have you walked up to an elder or deacon, in the last six months, and thanked them for all they do on your behalf?

I have been delighted to see their gutsy willingness to try new things – and yet stay open to ongoing suggestions from all of the congregation. I have yet to see, elsewhere, such a balance of openness and caring and commitment as we have in our deacons and elders. But I have not only seen these qualities in your elected leaders but in most of you as well.

I see individuals giving of themselves – making personal sacrifices and producing an outstanding quality of work. From looking at your individual efforts now, what you are doing, how you are pulling together for common purposes in meetings and tasks is producing results – I know that God looks at your heart and sees your piety and your dedication offered to God in a true sense of humility. You are genuinely good people.

The future holds some interesting things as well. One idea I'm working on is to try an educational experiment this Fall. I've noticed that students in my UB class are actually reading the assignments and coming prepared to truly engage in the Biblical studies. My idea is to make two books available from a local book store and as many as who want to participate, those individuals would order the two books this summer and come to church each week having read background material pertaining to the Sunday's text. Imagine reading the study materials ahead of time so when you come in here to worship,

you've already read thoroughly interesting material and are prepared – going into the sermon time. Let me know what you think of that idea.

I'm hoping we can increase our involvement in this immediate community. I'm hoping we can find ways, together, where more people in our neighborhood can take advantage of the ministry each of us can offer through the combined and partnered gifts we share. I'm planning on using materials, with you, to get you more in touch with the spiritual gifts that God has already given you. You want to contribute your abilities to make a difference in the lives of others and by becoming partners in using our gifts to enhance the ministry of others, we will go from a small staff to the largest church staff in the country – to 150 ministers – because you are ministering to others with your spiritual gifts.

In visiting in the homes of those who are new to our church, I always tell them some of my impressions of our community. I say that you are warm hearted and responsive to others. I tell them that you have a reverence for God, a sense of shared community and an almost supernatural amount of energy and drive. I tell them that you have a sense of expectancy – a “can do” attitude.

I tell my ministerial colleagues some of the things we occasionally are trying as well as the things you have given me permission to try. Some of them wonder when, if ever, they could try those things in their churches.

I have high expectations of you. To whom much is given, much is required. I expect your future to be as great as your past and present. I expect a lot from you as I do from myself because I am convinced that God is very present in our lives – but we forget that too often.

I've stopped trying to figure out why there is so much commitment and Christian growth and fun here but something is going on here and moving into the future that is far greater than any of us have imagined. From the birth and baptism of our children, through their years of participating in various groups, our adult gatherings and later in celebrating life in our seniors' activities, we are seeing an integration of a

people of God who have become like a family to one another.

This church is a work of art by God – the blending of the diversity of individual talents for the benefit of the whole. We are seeing newness and some change as well as a preservation of the good of the past. But change always involves an element of struggle. It is always work to slowly let go of something in order to pick up something else. But as we struggle in our growth, we seem to be able to keep our lines of communication open – listening to the wisdom of the majority and occasionally taking the risk of pursuing the visions of the few.

Maryvale Presbyterian Church is a warm and friendly church. It is supportive and caring. You are the result of the excitement in Jesus' words to Nicodemus – two thousand years ago. You have been called together by God's Holy Spirit in this time and this place because of the amazing power of God's love.

Some of you spent your childhood in this church and almost magically, you have held on to the wide-eyed faith of your childhood. All of us move into the future with the benefits of this community's wisdom and blessings of the past and the joys of the present. So as we gather, for one reason or another, we're going to touch and be touched by one another. We're going to risk learning and risk being taught by one another. And this magic will continue to happen because we know the brevity of this life and yet we celebrate the eternity we will spend together.

This is where we work and minister now – in the larger context of this sometimes harsh world. This is where we are finding more of a sense of our purpose of being used by God. For now, this is where we belong – among our larger family of faith.

And our little children and the youth and those of the middle years will be a sense of shelter for those who are older, because they will be like leaves on a tree that provide shade from the harsh rays of the loneliness of life. We are one in the spirit of the Living God. In this bond, we live now and forever – sheltered by the hand of our very powerful and compassionate God. ■