

Acting Out: Expect God to Show Up Sunday, 7/29/18

1 We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts, rekindling our passion, power, and purpose as we grow in acting out the Good News in this hurting world. Acts is all about God's forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and the mission of sharing both with the world. Don't forget to check the bulletin each week for the weekly challenge that relates to the message, as well as some questions you can consider if you want to go deeper in your faith reflections. Remember also that we're not secret agents for Jesus, we're sacred agents!

2 Meet George Muller, one of the heroes of the Christian faith. Does anyone know what George is famous for? Many things, actually! George's life spanned most of the 1800's, during which he is credited with providing for the spiritual and material needs for over 10,000 orphans in England, establishing Sunday Schools, printing and distributing Bibles, supporting world-wide missionaries, and leading over 3,000 people to Christ. His secret? It wasn't wealth or just a big heart, it was that George expected God to show up! He kept a daily prayer journal and recorded over 50,000 answered prayers over his lifetime. When George prayed, he expected God to show up. One writer offers this account of one of Muller's most famously answered prayers:¹

It was 1877 and George ...[was] sailing across the Atlantic [for a preaching engagement] when the ship's passage was... slowed by dense fog. George told the captain [of] his need to be in Quebec the following Saturday afternoon. "That's impossible," the captain replied and so George suggested they go down to the chart-room to pray. "Do you not see the density of the fog?" the captain asked him. "My eye," said George Muller, "is not on the denseness of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life." Then he prayed...

It was such a simple prayer... Nothing eloquent or wordy. "O Lord," prayed George, "if it is consistent with Thy will, please remove this fog in five minutes. You know the engagement You made for me in Quebec for Saturday. I believe it is your will." When he finished...[George said] "Open the door, Captain, and you will find the fog is gone." The captain got up and the fog was gone. On Saturday afternoon George Muller was in Quebec.

¹ <http://www.actingsupdrama.ca/2017/09/14/george-mullers-50000-answered-prayers/>

I'm guessing that some of you are looking at the title of this message and wondering about my theology. After all, I'm the one who keeps reassuring you that God's presence in our lives is a fact we can count on, regardless of what we think or do. God pursues a love relationship with us with an unrelenting love, so there's really never any doubt about God showing up, because God is already here. No, when I say, "Expect God to show up," I'm really talking about our own hopeful expectation that we will be able to know and experience God through life experiences and answered prayer. I'm talking about the kind of hopeful expectation George Muller had when he said, "My eye is not on the denseness of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life."

Peter and his band of disciples were well on their way to recovering this kind of faith. They'd come a long way from those dark days of fear and doubt during Holy Week, but they still struggled to believe that God would meet them in their times of greatest need. Let's continue the story of the divine prison break in Acts chapter 12. I'm picking up now in verse 9. **{Read Acts 12:9-16 (NLT)}**.

3 I love this translation of Psalm 31:24 from Eugene Peterson: "Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up. Expect God to get here soon." I wonder if perhaps Peter was reciting that very psalm to himself as he sat in prison, waiting for the murderous King Herod to bring him to trial. "Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up. Expect God to get here soon." If Peter did expect God to show up, then perhaps it was the fog of sleep that led Peter to think he was only having a dream when God's angel arrived to deliver him from prison. Then again, we heard in the earlier reading that the church was "earnestly praying for him." And then in this later account, we see that Peter's friends, presumably the same ones who were "earnestly praying" for Peter, were completely unprepared to accept that God did show up, answering their prayers directly, delivering Peter into their hands that very night.

If we're honest, isn't there a good chance that we might have reacted in the same way? God had displayed such awesome power to Peter and the others who were eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. In the blink of an eye, they seem to have forgotten! The very same thing happened to the Israelites who were led out of bondage in Egypt, witnesses to the divine pillar of fire and yet grumbling against God's plan to lead them through the wilderness. Even today, I'm guessing

that just like George Muller, we've all experienced thousands of answered prayers in our lives. But unlike George Muller, we often neglect to let those answered prayers form our character and grow our hopeful expectations of God. Wouldn't you like to have the kind of faith that wasn't surprised by God's loving kindness? Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up. Expect God to get here soon.

4 Have any of you tried prayer journaling? Sheryl Lehman recently led a class on prayer journaling, and I know she'd be thrilled to share some of her prayer journaling experiences with you. This is one of those spiritual disciplines that I've always wanted to do more of, but I honestly haven't done in a long time. I don't have any excuses, just the simple observation that any spiritual discipline requires just that- discipline. Never-the-less, I commend the practice to you.

Prayer journals can be as complicated and structured as you want. I've usually just used a plain, lined paper notebook or the note app on my phone. The basic idea behind prayer journaling is that you have a regular and written record of your communication with God- both the thoughts and feeling you share with God and the ways you hear and see God speak to you. You could do that with words, sentences, or even pictures. Some people like to pray by coloring. George Muller wrote down every petition he made to God and then periodically reviewed them in prayer, making a note of thanks every time he saw the answer to that prayer. You could simply keep a journal of things you are thankful for, questions you have for God, or just about anything else.

The real value of a prayer journal is that it draws your attention to God on a regular basis and then provides you with a way to look back and reflect on God's faithfulness. If you had kept a daily prayer journal starting from the time you first realized you were a Christian, I wonder how many prayers would be written down. For some of us it might be 10. For others of us, it might be thousands, or tens of thousands. Regardless of the number, there's one thing I'm sure of. When you lifted those prayers to God, God showed up. Did you notice it? Did you thank God for it? And even one week later, did you remember it? Prayer journaling is a good way to grow in all those areas.

5 If writing prayers isn't your thing, what can you do to keep your eyes off the fog and firmly on the living God? Let's face it, the fog of life can get awfully thick. Sometimes life

is so discouraging that we feel that we'll never see the sun again. Maybe that's where you're at today. Maybe that's where you'll be tomorrow. One simple thing you can try is to put a scripture verse in your pocket or purse that you can pull out and read periodically. You could even put it on the lock screen of your computer or cell phone. Pick something simple and encouraging, something that you can spiritually breathe in to fortify your hopeful expectation that God will show up. After a while, you might even discover that you've read that verse so many times that God has planted it in your heart.

Psalm 31:24 is a good one to start with: "Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up. Expect God to get here soon." Joshua 1:9 is similar: "Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Isaiah 40:31 is another favorite: "Those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint." There are more encouraging Bible verses than there are days in your lifetime, so pick one or two and give this a try. You can even Google "Encouraging Bible verses."

6 There are some parts of my life that I like to have planned well ahead of time. For example, I just finished my first draft of my preaching plan through August of 2019, and that's even a couple months later than usual. Planning is good, but life has a way of surprising us. None of us really know what each day will hold, including this one. Some of us will be surprised by joy. Some of us will be weighed down with grief. Very often, we experience both as well as an assortment of surprises that fall somewhere in between. Much of that we can't control. But as we seek to act out the forgiving love of God in this world, one thing we can and must change is our hopeful expectation that when the going gets tough, we can count on God showing up.

Your challenge this week is to stop what you're doing when you realize that you're moving into the thick fog. Go to God in prayer, however briefly. And then confidently watch for God to show up. God might not come in the way you expect it. God might not come at a time that you recognize it. But God will always show up.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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