

# Expect great things

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, December 4, 2011, The Second Sunday of Advent.  
Based on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8.*

**Y**ou may remember Zorba the Greek. If you haven't read the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, perhaps you've seen the movie in which the great actor Anthony Quinn gives the performance of a lifetime, playing this exuberant man, who no matter how bad things are never forgets that we can always dance.

He befriends Basil, a quiet young Englishman, a writer, who has inherited a small house, with an abandoned ignite mine, in a village in Crete. There he hopes to overcome his writer's block. While waiting for the ferry, he meets Alexis Zorba, who promises to help him restart the mine and otherwise guide him in the local ways.

But Basil finds mostly loneliness and the discomfort of his own rather repressed way of being. Frustrated, and full of both admiration and exasperation at Zorba's utterly uninhibited life, Basil asks:

"Zorba, have you ever been married?"

"Am I not a man?" comes the reply. "Of course I've been married. Wife, house, kids, everything . . . *the full catastrophe!*"

The writer and physician John Kabat-Zinn takes that great phrase and makes it the title of his book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, and it's a classic that brings the techniques of his University of Massachusetts Stress Reduction Clinic for all to learn.

Kabat-Zinn makes a distinction I want to make today, in which the word "catastrophe" is used in a careful, perhaps novel, way. It doesn't mean disaster. It means "the poignant enormity of our life experience." It can mean the big, painful, true disasters, and it can also mean all the little things that can and do go wrong and drive us crazy with stress.

But let's be clear what he doesn't mean. Kabat-Zinn's use of *catastrophe* is quite different from what psychologists call "catastrophic thinking."

In the latter, you hear the conventional use of *catastrophe*. Example: a mother's daughter doesn't come home on time. The weather is fine, she's always been responsible, and there's no reason to think something awful has happened. But the mind of the mother is out of control. It goes straight to the most dire and dangerous outcome for the daughter. People with this syndrome can quickly turn a benign event into a disaster. And if you think and live that way, eventually you begin to live a limited life, hedged in by the obsessive concern for safety. Life becomes dangerous and even unjust.

Every year in the Advent season, we revisit the very useful record of both uses of catastrophe—both in the sense of the full range of real life and also in the sense of the debilitating and distorting anxiety behind catastrophic thinking.

A thread of catastrophic thinking runs through the Bible; not the only thread, but it's there, to be sure. It begins in the Garden of Eden and says that the human species catastrophically fell, that it is depraved and lost until saved by the specific, elective action of God. Some of this is picked up in the gloomy prophecies, the screeds against the leaders and people of ancient Israel. Some of those are reinforced by the I-told-you-so's of prophets who record the sorry results of personal and governmental corruption.

But mostly in the prophets, there is the possibility of turnaround, of redemption of those true signs and anxieties.

We have one of those today, a high point in the record:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.*

And although this is a declaration of pardon and a welcome home for exiles, Isaiah also paints a picture of God's return, too, and with it, a healed world:

A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,*

That's the full catastrophe of life, that "poignant enormity of our life's experience."

And this year, we have that vision paired with and repeated by the opening scene of promise in Mark's gospel.

Here the voice is that of John the baptizer, as he began his ministry, he didn't mince his words: "You brood of vipers" is not everyone's way of warming up an audience. And his analysis of the human condition was as unsparing as the earlier prophets of his tradition, with whom he was inevitably compared.

But he turned out to be quite creative in responding to his indictment of human sins and his uncompromising call for repentance.

He took an arcane and limited ritual and put it out there. *Be baptized in the water. You can wash away your troubles. You can start over.* And by the way, the one who will baptize even more powerfully is on the way. More than water, he'll bring the fire, the energy, the spirit of life itself.

Expect great things, life's full catastrophe.

The one who is coming will live that energy, fire and spirit. He'll model the full catastrophe of being human. And he will surprise you with how he finds that even in the midst of bad stuff, hurtful and disappointing stuff, it is possible to find room to grow, room to heal, room to find at least some strength for living.

They called him a man of sorrows, but before there was a Zorba there was a Jesus who listened to people, broke bread and sat at table with all kinds of people, named their inner demons and challenged them to admit they were there.

He found the high and mighty as absurd as they were offensive. There's humor in a camel, and there's a bite to that humor when someone pairs it with the eye of a needle.

He said that real happiness is knowing your need for God. The poor in spirit don't have to navigate the eye of the needle. They just need to keep on keeping on. It's amazing what grace and power there is when you do.

The way of Jesus is the very opposite of catastrophic thinking and living. He's much closer to full catastrophe living, and by that I mean it's a vigorous way of accepting the reality of life, including its inevitable catastrophes.

You can live to expect great things, not just catastrophes. Anyone can. You just need to begin with an attitude of realistic acceptance of what life hands you.

It's a stewardship way of life. It says, look what I've been given: life itself, with its inherent energies and possibilities, including the things that can't be seen, and things that can't be bought.

It's a healing way of life that says that while you can't avoid catastrophe and the pain and chaos that go with it, you can deal with it.

It's living as if there really is a prophetic, hope-filled promise echoing down through human experience.

It may be a stretch, but the transition from the confines of catastrophic thinking to the embrace of the full catastrophe of this life we've been given is mirrored in the transition from John the baptizer to Jesus.

And that embrace of life might look like the scene we remember from the film version of Zorba the Greek.

Basil, still dressed in suit and tie is standing on the beach. His fascination with Zorba, and his anger at Zorba's irresponsibility is now spent. He looks at his friend and says, "Teach me to dance."

For the first time it's Zorba who's astonished. And they begin to dance. Arm on shoulder, first a simple step or two, then the dips, then the leaps. Two men, on the beach, for a full three minutes in that marvelous black and white film.

It's a cliché, but one you can make true: life is not about what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you.

Expect the full catastrophe of what God has given you. Use it. Celebrate it. Dance it.

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