

# *Beyond Expectations*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Over the past couple of years, you've heard me talk about the approach that's captured by the word *anticippointment* – that is, reducing the likelihood of disappointment by deliberately lowering our expectations – in other words, *managing expectations*.



*Rainbow and Mask*  
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It looks like health authorities had this approach in mind when, as the novel coronavirus was identified earlier last year, they announced that a covid vaccine was *at least* 12-18 months away. They qualified this even further by stating that this was the *optimistic* outlook.

This came among more cautious speculation that a vaccine might not ever come at all, or that it might not be effective enough.

It seems that the approach paid off. With managed expectations, the vaccines that came in, ahead of the expected schedule – *under* 12 months – and with remarkably high effectivity rates, roundly exceeded all expectations.

As we have also seen, this victory is only partial at best. There are many logistical challenges ahead, from mass production of the newly-approved vaccines, to mass distribution of them, as well as a prevalent vaccine hesitancy among many in the population (including some concerns that are legitimate, while others are simply unfounded). And that is without even accounting for some of the lingering questions that remain unknown, such as how long immunity by vaccination will last, to what extent it curbs transmission, as well as rare adverse effects that may have been missed in smaller clinical trials.

So, in some ways, even exceeding expectations still leaves room for ongoing managing of expectations.

And, as we have become aware in our community this past week, even a victory in record time was still not fast enough for some, who have already been fatally infected, and will never have a chance to get the protection from the miraculous development of these vaccines.

Even exceeded expectations have left some unrealized hopes behind.

And still, it is worth getting a deeper appreciation for what this victory – partial as it may be – means for our world community. You have heard me talk about these new vaccines over the past few weeks, because this record-time medical breakthrough goes beyond a few research labs getting lucky, or an odd intense all-nighter, as scientists burnt the midnight oil... this one time.

This is a story of intense and intentional cooperation and collaboration through space and through time.

So, let us talk a bit about how the covid virus has played out in time...

In many ways, the year 2020 began a bit early – in December of 2019, as the novel coronavirus was identified around new year's eve *day*, 2019.

Had the virus been identified just a couple days later, we would have spent 2020 talking about the dreaded covid-20 pandemic... and the part of me that likes order still gets a bit irked by the fact that it wasn't covid-20 in 2020. But it is perhaps fitting that this irksome number "19" remains in the covid name, because it is a reminder that covid, and diseases like it, are not just the product of the year when we're most

aware of it – it’s a product of a larger system that has allowed the disease to take hold.

Likewise, the vaccines of 2020 are also not the product of 2020 alone.

Many people are wondering how this process – which usually takes several years – could be measured in months, without cutting any corners. And that’s because while the process of creating, testing, approving, and commencing deployment took place almost exclusively within the 12 months of 2020, the larger systems already in place predate the year 2020. In a sense, the new vaccines were in fact *not* created in the space of 1 year – in a truer sense, it was more like *at least* 200 years.

The reason they could be prepared in record time, is largely in part because we relied on so much previous research, knowledge, wisdom, and collaboration from the past several centuries – and yes, a measure of luck.

Looking back just a few years, we can recognize that local governments and international agencies had already put systems in place for faster vaccine development, including new protocols and existing research on the innovative mRNA technology – these faster processes didn’t begin last January... people with foresight had invested in them years before.

When Chinese health authorities sequenced the virus’ code just about a year ago, that information could be put to use virtually overnight by research teams all over the world, thanks to the medical foundations that were already in place.

There was also financial, political, and institutional will to act quickly. Money came in from many sources – some public and some private. Health authorities gave priority to the ethical and technical decisions that needed to be made. There were also improvements in the systems used for data collection, and the process by which approvals were evaluated, allowing for the same level of scrutiny in review, but with an

approach that allowed for concurrent following of the data by overseers, which assisted in making the final decisions more quickly, while safeguarding the quality and integrity of the data being used.

One of the reasons the clinical trials could be conducted so quickly was by taking advantage of the very challenges of the situation itself. In a lemons-to-lemonade approach, the very fact that the virus' reach was so widespread, and that people were aware of it, meant that recruitment for the trials happened immediately, rather than over months, and the efficacy of the vaccines could be tested against high exposure rates, which made it easier to collect useful data in a short amount of time – using one of the virus' main features (it's ease of spread) as a tool for us to combat it.

But looking even further back, we see that the story of vaccination goes back to older breakthroughs, such as the story of Edward Jenner, over two hundred years ago, when he noticed that milkmaids' immunity to smallpox may come from their exposure to cowpox. His was not the only discovery of its kind, as that kind of wisdom had been observed – and applied – by others in his time and before him.

My friends, I've been giving space to this story because it is a witness to a part of the human spirit that may have gotten lost amid the many difficult moments of 2020. This story tells us something worth remembering – and it is worth celebrating. And it is imperfect and incomplete. Astonishingly early, and somehow still too late.

My friends, just as the year 2020 began in earnest in December of 2019, so it is that, in many ways, 2021 appears to have begun in December of 2020, with the approval and deployment of the new vaccine. If 2020 was a year of rising infections, 2021 may well be a year of rising vaccinations, but more tellingly, it could well be the year when we become participants in fulfilling one of the other stories of 2020 – a story of preparation and foresight (even when it didn't always seem that way); a story of ingenuity and resilience; a story of gratitude for the

work – sometimes invisible – of previous generations; a story when individuals and communities each have a role to play; a story of small, cumulative victories, that add up to victories beyond expectations.

My friends, we'll have a role to play in the coming months. It is possible that not all of you may be eligible to get the vaccine for medical reasons (adverse effects, while rare, are also a reality). Those of us who can, may participate by getting the vaccine when we're eligible. And all of us will also need to participate, over the next months, by continuing a practice of limited physical contact, wearing masks in consideration for others, and following general hygiene and health guidelines. As we have seen in this story beyond expectations, small victories, across space and time, make the major breakthroughs possible. We are part of this story.

So may it be,  
In Solidarity,  
Amen

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*Suggested Hymns:*

### **Opening Hymn #41 You That Have Spent the Silent Night**

Words: George Gascoigne, 1540-1577, adapt.

Music: Nikolaus Herman, 1480-1561, harmony by J.S. Bach, 1685-1750

LOBT GOTT, IRH CHRISTEN

### **Hymn #344 A Promise through the Ages Rings**

~)-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , rev., © 1983 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Severus Gastorius, c. 1675, ed. by A. Waggoner

WAS GOTT THUT

### **Closing Hymn #350 The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time**

~)-| Words: John Andrew Storey, 1935-1997

Music: African American spiritual, c. 1750-1875, adapt. and harmony by Harry T. Burleigh, 1866-1949

MCKEE