

“Questioning Expectations”
December 17, 2006

Isaiah 12:2-6
Luke 3:7-18

Imagine that you're living in a town or a region long ago where most folks are just trying to get through their lives, day to day. There's work to do and children to feed and tax collectors to pay. But there are also larger forces at work. Religious, political, and social divisions flare up periodically, sometimes violently. Ethnic differences and divisions tear at the social fabric. There's a nearly unimaginable distance between the richest and the poorest, between the most powerful and the least powerful. Not surprisingly, there are some grumblings of dissatisfaction and occasional attempts at reform or even revolution. But, by and large, those at the low end of the power and privilege spectrum keep their focus on trying to meet their families' basic needs, and those at the upper end keep their focus on their own desires.

And imagine that, into this uneasy but relatively stable place, comes a wild card, and I do mean “wild.” Into this place comes a human being with some pretty strange things to say and a pretty edgy way of saying them. This man tells people to bear fruit worthy of repentance and then warns them that, if they don't bear good fruit, they'll be cut down and thrown into the fire. For good measure, he even insults the people who have traveled a long distance just to hear him, calling them a “brood of vipers.”

When people ask him what they should do, he calms down enough to give them instructions that are simple, but not especially *easy* to follow: if you have more than you truly need, share with those who don't; take only what is owed; and never use force or falsehood for personal gain. (They are simple instructions, but, if we take a honest look at ourselves as a church, a community, a nation, and a species, I think we have to admit that we're still far from meeting those simple standards of behavior.)

Even though this man's message is a bit harsh, even though he seems to be willing to disrupt the status quo – or maybe *because* he's willing to disrupt the status quo – people continue to come out to hear him. As the Gospel of Luke describes the scene, *crowds* come out to him, to receive what he's calling a baptism of repentance. Instead of dismissing him as yet another wild and wooly prophet, crowd after crowd comes to hear him and to be in his presence. He must have had charisma; he must have had a powerful presence. He must have touched something deep within people, giving them hope, a sense of new possibilities.

Down at the River Jordan, there's electricity in the air. John has achieved the 1st century equivalent of rock star status. People's expectations start to rise. They begin to wonder if John is the messiah. But John says, “Oh, no, not me. I'm not the messiah. I'm just the forerunner. Someone else is coming, someone who will have more power than I have, and the one who is coming will be wielding a winnowing fork, to separate the wheat from the chaff.”

In other words, after dashing the crowds' hope that *he* is the messiah, John *reinforces* the crowds' expectations that the messiah is coming and will wield great power. Then he adds the prediction that the one who will wield that power will also

separate people, burning some of them with unquenchable fire. And this, we hear in today's reading, constitutes good news.

Maybe it's good news; maybe it's not. Maybe John accurately described the coming messiah, but maybe he didn't. As you're about to hear, I have my doubts, and I have those doubts because the Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ I encounter in scripture, in prayer, and in daily life, don't match John's description down by the River Jordan.

As you know, because of the greens in the sanctuary and the children's pageant will follow this worship service -- and because I keep mentioning it, Sunday after Sunday -- we're in the season of Advent. Advent is a season of preparation and waiting. It is a season of wonder and rejoicing that God is present in the great miracle of birth and is present in the smallest and most vulnerable of human beings, a newborn child.

So, despite John's predictions of a powerful messiah, in Advent and Christmas, we do not prepare for, await, and then celebrate the coming of a powerful conqueror like Caesar or his imperial descendants. No, we prepare for, wait for, and celebrate the coming of a helpless infant. Yes, it's true, the Gospels all give us examples of Jesus' power as an adult to heal, his power to create abundant food and drink in the face of scarcity and great human need. The Gospels describe Jesus as someone with courage and the power of truth. But in the Gospels, Jesus *not* powerful in the way that most 1st century people in Palestine and the Roman Empire understood and experienced power. He did not wield a sword; he did not lead armies. He had no real political or economic power.

So in the Christmas story, we do not celebrate the mighty and the powerful in the usual sense. We celebrate the vulnerable infant, who begins life in truly modest circumstances. And in that celebration, the Christian tradition dares to proclaim, against all expectations to the contrary, that this is how God enters the world. Not in power and might, but in vulnerability and need. That was a very radical message 2000 years ago, and it is a very radical message here and now.

Let's think for a few minutes about the here and now. There is great beauty on this planet, in the greening hills and fields of the Valley of the Moon, in the deep dark and the bright lights of the night sky, in the fierce waves of a storm-driven ocean, and in the loving eyes of friends, family, and strangers. But there is also great ugliness, violence, and despair. Sons and daughters die far too young, lost to disease or depression or violence. Hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters are denied their humanity and deprived of their sanity in prisons down the road and across the globe. Here, in this community, for both private and public consumption, we insult one another on the basis of political affiliations and convictions, and we distrust one another because of differences in culture, language, skin color, and wealth.

Now try to take all that beauty and all that brokenness into your hearts at the same time. If there is a longing in your heart, a deep conviction that the violence and hate and despair that you see are not inevitable, are not part of God's vision for creation ... if you believe that God is at work, moving creation toward that vision ... if you dare to hope that the Spirit of the Living God, the Sacred Source of life itself, can become known to us anew and lead us toward justice, mercy, and peace ... how do you imagine that it might happen?

Thinking in terms of a messiah, God's anointed one, what would you imagine or expect God's anointed one to do, to bring healing or salvation to this world, here and now? Would she be a political leader? A "green" entrepreneur? A doctor? Would he have extraordinary grassroots organizing skills? An uncanny ability to raise money?

What *are* our expectations of God in our lives and our world? Are we consciously or subconsciously still hoping for the kind of divine presence John seemed to have been describing down by the River Jordan? Are we hoping for an extremely powerful person or spirit, who will cull out and punish all those bad actors in the world, while welcoming us good – or at least better – folks with open arms? Maybe some of you *are* hoping for the powerful Christ with the winnowing fork and the sword ... or maybe not. Judging by the anger and the anguish I've heard from many of you, concerning certain people and certain situations, a powerful, divine figure of justice and punishment must be an alluring thought, at least from time to time.

I certainly find the thought of fiery justice alluring every now and then – until I get honest about my own imperfect love for God and neighbor. Alluring, yes. Tempting, yes. But also more than a little scary, and most definitely not faithful to the Jesus I encounter in the Gospels and the Christ I encounter still afoot and at work in the world.

The man Christians know as God's anointed one was born to a family and in a town that all the political, social, and economic leaders considered insignificant. His birth was made known, not through imperial decree, but by angels and visions and a star in the night sky. That child became an adult who loved and healed, who spoke the truth to power and refused to respond to force with force or to violence with violence. That child became the adult who was heard asking for forgiveness for his persecutors, even as he hung from a cross. So, despite the expectation of John the Baptist and many others, that the messiah would be a mighty warrior who would end the Roman occupation of Palestine, the man whom Christians proclaim as the messiah wielded only the "weapons" of love, truth, and faithfulness.

The Christian story is the story of the vulnerability of God – the vulnerability of an infant and the vulnerability of the betrayed, abandoned, and crucified Jesus. This story defied the expectations of Jesus' contemporaries in the 1st century, and it defies the expectations of a 21st century seduced by the power of violence and the false promises of material wealth.

In the remaining days of Advent, throughout the 12 days of Christmas, and into the months ahead, I invite all of us to question our expectations of God and to be willing to encounter, embrace, and love the holy in the most unexpected places and the most unexpected people. God may come anew, into our lives and our world, through another young woman – perhaps a woman named "Maria," whom the law dares to call "illegal." God may come anew through the heart and mind of a prisoner at San Quentin who has been transformed by forgiveness and grace. God may come anew through a transgendered youth in the Tenderloin or a gang member in Santa Rosa ... or Sonoma. God may even come anew, into this beautiful and troubled world, through you, my beloved sisters and brothers. You may arise one morning, look into the mirror, and see that the beauty of God's love and healing grace is radiating from your own eyes.

Hold all your expectations and understandings of God lightly, open your hearts to the God who comes in vulnerable love, and you may discover that Christ child is indeed soon to be born, yet again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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