

January 10, 2010 – First Sunday after Epiphany “Filled with Expectation”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

If you happened to notice the sermon title for today you just **might** have thought to yourself, “That sounds more like a pre-Christmas message.” I know I had a couple of Sundays off for which I am very grateful, but I also know that Christmas is over, most of the decorations have been put away and, by and large, we have returned to a more “normal” way of living – and worshiping.

But those words reflected in the sermon title were not my own. They are, in fact, the opening words of the gospel lesson for today. “As the people were **filled with expectation**, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”

The setting for these words is very different from Christmas. In just two weeks we have moved from the silent night of Jesus’ birth, to the visit of the Magi bestowing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, to Jesus (supposedly some thirty years later) showing up on the shores of the River Jordan to be baptized by John in order that he might begin his public ministry. These are not pre-Christmas words and this is not a pre-Christmas group of people who have come together in anticipation, in expectation, that the long awaited Messiah just might be this wild man who was calling them to repentance.

It’s almost pathetic just how desperate these people were as they waited in expectation. If you read the passage that immediately precedes the one for today and ascribe any historical accuracy to it whatsoever, you soon discover these people would tolerate almost anything in their hopes for the Messiah to come into their midst.

John, in the style of tent-meeting revival, berated those willing to listen – using scare tactics to get them to respond by saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

It’s a style of preaching I can honestly say I’ve never given a shot at. Maybe I should try it? I doubt in doing so that I’d ever be that effective at helping people to realize or prepare for what, I believe, God is calling us to do by using similar tones or message. It’s just not me. But some still do it – even today – and, I have to admit, for those who regularly engage in similar homiletical antics – folks respond. There is a certain segment of the population that responds very well when they are told **what** to believe, **how** to live, and **what** to do.

But don’t worry – I’m not going there, I know you are too bright for that kind of approach. But I am quite interested in the social and religious dynamics of those who gathered at

the Jordan on that day. What was going on within them – as they were filled with expectation? I wonder how long they waited? I wonder if this was their first time to come to the Jordan to hear John or whether they were regular attenders? Were they invited to fill out a blue guest card, pass the pew pad, or welcomed to the fellowship hour after the service? What was going on there and what happened during those intervening years between the birth of Jesus and this public appearance that aroused such interest and filled their hearts with expectation as they awaited the coming of the Messiah?

We know so little about Jesus' formative years. Oh we have shreds in Gnostic gospels and some writing from Jewish historians like Josephus and a few others, but very little recorded is given the same attention as they canonical gospels where we jump from the birth narratives to Jesus' baptism with the turn of a page.

What we **do** have, I believe given this brief description, is a social dynamic that we can all relate to – even today. Whether we readily acknowledge it or not, we are still looking for a Messiah – one to come among us whom we hope will solve our problems or be a beacon of hope, a source of inspiration, a light shining brightly particularly in times of prolonged darkness. Many of us hoped that might occur with the election of Barack Obama whose “yes we can” mantra made a whole new world seem so possible, some look for it in the Dalai Lama or another spiritual guru to bring insight, illumination, enlightenment, transcendence. While we may not resonate with the likes of John and his challenging words of fire and brimstone – we too may be filled with anticipation as we await a leader who will show us the way – from where we are currently to where we want to go and be.

I think about that a lot as your pastor as I try to think with you about the challenges we currently face as a congregation. We are not immune to the economic climate that has successfully beaten us into varying levels of fear as we face an uncertain future. John the Baptist not only shouted on the Jordan shores 2000 years ago with a message of doom – he is still sending a very clear message today that has turned our living from that of expectation, optimism and hope to perhaps a life filled with cynicism, self-reliance, and a doubt that God still cares.

While I will not try and compete with the voice of John whose intent, I believe, was sincerely to prepare disciples for the coming of Jesus among them – I must remind you that a message of fear has **no place** in a life of faith. Oh, we cannot bury our heads in the sand and act as unwise or unfaithful stewards of the resources that surround us and with which we have been entrusted. The current economic forces that prevail have wrecked havoc with our savings and many of our dreams for the future. But neither should we hoard that which we possess, and ignore the fact that we live in abundance and that it is in sharing – perhaps even 10 percent of what we have that we will begin to experience the grace of God in entirely new ways.

God reminded the ancient Israelites that they would not face adversity alone. In the book of Isaiah, read along with the gospel today God reminds God's people:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
 When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 And the flame shall not consume you.
 For I am the Lord your God,
 The Holy One of Israel, your Savior,
 Do not fear, for I am with you.

It may not be easy to live the life of faith, but if we give up on living with expectation we give up that which makes us unique in a world that needs good news. The baptism of Jesus reminded both him and those who gathered on that day that God's ancient promise still exists as the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and they thought they heard the voice of God in that moment reassuring them of God's presence – a message to each one of them, "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased.

And so I ask you, in what spirit do we gather today? Is it with expectation, with hope, in prayer that Spirit might speak to us as we sang just moments ago – melt me, mold me, fill me, use me?

One of my favorite books is Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. The narrator of the book is an elderly minister who knows he's about to die after a long and steady but fairly quiet life as a pastor. He is writing to his young son, the child of a late-in-life marriage to a much younger woman, about things like watching his little boy play in the sprinkler, and a young couple walking in the rain. Water, the stuff of life. But he also tells the story of one of his childhood exploits as a preacher's kid who, with another preacher's kid, decided to baptize a litter of kittens. The boys took this all very seriously, he says, but the mother cat didn't, and she interrupted their little service and took the kittens away right in mid-baptism. When the boy asked his father the pastor "in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it," his father gave him a stern response that the sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect. The narrator remembers, "That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. I got his meaning, though, and I did no more baptizing until I was ordained."

Now, at the end of his life and after many years of baptizing the faithful of his flock, the old pastor looks back on the day he baptized the cats: "I still remember," he says, "how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time" (*Gilead*).

Blessing. Beloved. Wind, and water: life is utterly mysterious and yet, here in the unknown, here in the midst of all that might make us afraid, God is near to us, just as God was near to Jesus as he stood there in the river Jordan, with so much still ahead of him. As he moved ahead through it all, step by step, he knew that he was God's Beloved Child.

The good news is that we can still claim that blessing for ourselves – and in so doing knowing that with God all things are possible. That the sacred, the mysterious, the impossible are all within the grasp of God and that we ought to live in expectation of what God can do in our midst.

It doesn't matter if the sky opens up and the voice of God can be heard...for the Spirit is truly in our midst and, in this Epiphany season, there is no doubt that we will be blessed to witness the workings of God's Spirit in many and marvelous ways, from the smallest kindnesses to great healings, from stories of reconciliation and newfound faith to visions of ministry for this great church...there is so much to look forward to, in faith – something important is about to happen, indeed.

Amen.