

Sermon: Managing Expectations

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18**

It seems that John the Baptist is a little more involved in the Jesus story than we thought he was. Just last week, he quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord,' and today he's telling the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers – the pagan Roman soldiers – just how to do it. And their expectations that John was the Messiah were raised.

As in last week's reading from Luke, Jesus isn't mentioned today, but he's in the background. John, or Luke, is setting us up for the big reveal when Jesus does finally take the stage.

Last week, John 'went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' This proved to be a popular message because now we're told that there are *crowds* coming out to be baptized by him. Among the crowds are tax collectors and soldiers – not the usual suspects, as Inspector Renault once said. There are no Pharisees or scribes following John, just people in need of a baptism of repentance, people seeking forgiveness for what they done, so to speak.

But John is not a touchy-feely kind of prophet. His first line is a real attention-getter, in the same way that a drill instructor gets your attention by calling you a maggot on the first day of basic training. You're wide awake after that. But by seeking baptism and forgiveness, are we really fleeing from God's wrath to come? John just sucked all the air out of the room. Yet, no one left to go home. Maybe John represents the crowd's last best hope to avoid the fire, because they ask, 'What then should we do?'

After that harsh opening, his actual message seems rather tame, even kind: to the crowds, he said, 'share;' to the tax collectors, 'be fair;' and to the soldiers, 'just do your job and don't be bullies.' This is advice that anyone can follow, and everyone relaxed, thinking maybe this guy really is the Messiah. But, he stopped them, saying, 'Hold on; it's not me; just wait until you meet the next guy.'

Imagine living in a world where fourteen percent of the population under age 18 lived in poverty. That was true in Massachusetts two years ago. Or imagine you lived in a place and time where the greed of others wiped out your economic future, as it did for many people across the country in the 2008 banking crisis. Or what if it truly was the content of your character rather than the color of your skin that determined how well you related to your local police force?

These are all analogous to John's answers when the crowds asked, 'What then should we do?' Help those in need; be fair to people, especially in business transactions; treat everyone with the respect and dignity you would want for yourself. Be a human.

John speaks about a kingdom in which everyone can participate. He's not saying blow it all up, or retreat to a cave; he's not asking anyone to make a sacrifice. He does require us to give over our lives to God and to live according to God's ways but that doesn't seem like such a bad thing. In fact, it's what we strive for. John tells the crowds that they can participate in God's kingdom right where they are. It's within their reach any time, all the time, as it is within ours.

The lectionary contrasts the passage from Luke with a hopeful, positive reading from Isaiah. He says God is our salvation, and with joy, we will draw water from the wells of that salvation. Isaiah speaks in an active voice: trust and be not afraid; give thanks; make known God's deeds; sing praises; shout aloud; for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah says that we need not be afraid when God is near. Quite the opposite. We're edging away from the theme of judgment that we've heard most of the year.

With John the Baptist, we're no longer looking down the road to the end times. Now we're more concerned with today, and maybe tomorrow. But there is that bit about baptism by fire, and a winnowing of the wheat from the chaff. And this, John says, is the *good* news! And so, it is, if we recalibrate how we hear these words. Rather than think of them from our point of view, what if we adopt God's point of view?

No one likes to be judged, not by our friends, spouses, co-workers. It makes us uncomfortable, even more so when God's wrath might be involved. We know that justice means getting what you deserve, and that mercy means getting what you don't deserve, but the prospect of receiving God's judgment makes us shy away from God.

To judge something is to see it as it is. Kittens are cute until I catch them hanging from the window screens or working over the couch with their sharp little claws. That's how I judge kittens, by seeing them as they are. For the most part, they are pretty cute. God sees us as we are too, and that is God's judgment. On my worst days, I don't want God to see me, like a kitten caught in the act.

But God is always around. As the Lord said to Jeremiah, 'Am I a God nearby, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord' (Jeremiah 23:23-24). So escaping God's judgment is futile. That's not necessarily a bad thing. According to Elihu in the Book of Job, 'There is no darkness or deep shadow where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves' (Job 34:22). So, it goes both ways: God has an eye on the tax collector too.

But maybe God doesn't see or care what is horrible about us. Last week, Malachi spoke about how God will refine us with fire as silver and gold are refined; that all the impurities will be removed, implying that there is something good and shiny within us all to begin with. The same is true with the wheat and the chaff – it's all one thing until it hits the threshing floor for Jesus' winnowing-fork to separate. We are the wheat, all of us. The chaff is the leftover stuff that has no value to God.

It's sounding more and more like good news to me.

It is the Christian hope that we are all seen by God and that none of us are forgotten. It is our hope, too, that by the time we face God's judgment, the impurities embedded in the gold and the chaff hiding the wheat will be all burned away by Jesus. And what God will see will be the best gold, the purest silver, and the finest wheat.

Now we can sing for joy that God is in our midst. Now we can be filled with expectation and anticipation for the coming of the Messiah.

Amen.