

## *“Filled with expectation”*

**December 13, 2009**

*Text: Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18*

### I.

Say whatever you will about **John the Baptist**, but at least he wasn't dull. In the gospel stories, whenever there is some mention of him, sparks fly.

We see this in our reading this morning when he's out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance. This proclamation, whatever it was, was almost certainly not low key and not indifferent. In other words: it gets our attention.

*You brood of vipers!  
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*

*Be sincere in your repentance! In other words: change your behaviors. And don't try to hide behind your connection to Abraham and your religious traditions. What God wants is changed hearts and changed actions.*

**William Willimon**, the United Methodist Bishop in Alabama, former chaplain at Duke University and a popular author, used to remind his students ...

*If you are going to graduate, you must first get past the English department. If you are going to practice law, you must pass the bar. If you want to get to medical school, you must survive organic chemistry.*

*Likewise, if you want to get to the joy of Bethlehem in the presence of Jesus, you must get past John the Baptist in the desert. The word from John is repent and turn toward God.*

### II.

John is addressing the depths of the human condition—namely, our human tendency to be out of sync with God. And when would this be?

We're out of sync with God when we become too caught up in ourselves ... when we see things too much from our point of view ... when pride and power and greed begin to dominate our spirit.

John the Baptist is addressing the human situation—our human situation. John wants us to turn to God and, in our turning, to make the changes we need to make so that our will is more in line with God's will; so that we see more fully the big picture of our lives—our family, our community, our nation, our world.

What John is doing is stirring things up. He's jolting people out of any complacency, out of any sense where they can just take things for granted—do whatever they want as if there were no larger, moral force in the universe.

Apparently John's words are *not* falling on idle ears. Folks are paying attention. And not only that, many are wondering who he is. Could he be the one? The long-awaited Messiah?

### III.

With all this as a backdrop, people begin to ask him, ***What then should we do?***

Isn't that always the human question? When the sun sets in the west, after all is said and done, after we've listened and listened, prayed and prayed, ***What then should we do?***

John's answer to them is very simple, if not totally obvious:

*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none;  
And whoever has food must do likewise.*

In other words, share what you have with those who have less ... or who perhaps have nothing at all. Isn't that how we are supposed to respond to God—with eager and generous hearts? Sharing out of whatever abundance is ours?

Isn't that what Christians do? Isn't that what love and compassion and mercy and tenderness ... isn't that what they all point to?

*Share with one another, out of whatever you have. Reach out to the destitute and the deprived and to the victims of whatever misfortune or injustice.*

Stuff happens in our lives and we have to support one another.

The problem with our human situation is that—always—our human tendency is to be too focused on looking out for our own self interests. That's just the way it is, isn't it? It's the human situation.

*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none;  
And whoever has food must do likewise.*

### IV.

The final outcome of all of this—this preaching and challenging and prompting—is that people are filled with expectation. They're energized and excited. This is what John's *preaching in the wilderness* leads to.

... *the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.* Again, the people are energized, energized with wonder. Could this *John* be the one?

John immediately straightens them out about that: *I baptize with water; but the one who is coming—who is more powerful than I—will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

Wow, that'll get our attention. Something is happening; expectation is in the air.

And that's the larger point: that the expectation of the people is being lifted. Clearly, John was making a connection with them.

Expectation is such an important element in our lives. It's an important part of our faith, too. Think what our lives would be like without any expectation ... about what tomorrow might bring—a job, perhaps, that we've been looking for, waiting for ... wondering when it would happen.

But what would it be like if we had no expectation that it would happen.

There's a real sense in which our expectation gives us energy and purpose for living today. Isn't that the case? It's a sense of expectation that says, *Go for it! Aim high!*

It's our expectation that says, *Don't give up! Keep after it. Keep working hard, praying hard, trying hard, giving it your best.* As people of faith, friends, we must live our lives with expectation ... expectation of possibility. Expectation of what *can* be; expectation of dreams that can be realized.

## V.

Take the life-experience of 8-year old little Sofi. Born in Siberia, in Russia, one of the most bitterly cold and desolate places on earth ... and then, early on, as an infant, she was orphaned. What a beginning; orphaned as an infant in Siberia.

But then at age two, she was adopted, sight unseen, by Laurie Collins, a single mother in Scottsdale, Arizona. And it seems that Sofi's star has been on the rise ever since. As a third-grader, she entered an essay contest and out of some 10,000 contestants, she won. Imagine that! Little Sofi, a former orphan in Siberia.

The essay contest was sponsored by toy-maker LEGO and PLANETARY SOCIETY and as a result of winning, her family received an all-expense paid trip to **Kennedy Space Center** in Florida to watch the lift off of the *Mars Rover*.

While there, she was asked to read an excerpt from her winning essay.

*I used to live in an orphanage, she wrote. It was dark and lonely. At night, I looked up at the sparkly sky and felt better. I dreamed I could fly there, to the sky above. And then I came to America. In America, I can make all my dreams come true. Thank you for giving me the spirit and the opportunity.*

Wow! What words of inspiration ... from an 8-year old who's been on an unbelievable journey.

## VI.

Expectation is what the spirit of Advent and Christmas are all about. The expectation of new life and the new beginnings such new life makes possible. The Spirit calls us to live our lives towards expectation.

In the events here at The Growing Place (i.e., parades at Thanksgiving or the Christmas show, like the one they'll be doing next week), I love to look at the faces of parents when they're watching their little girl or boy.

They're so excited and expectant ... seeing their child performing, growing up, and evolving—amidst the swirl of expectations and hopes that surround them.

And of course, for me and Yvette, as grandparents, now, expectation has taken on a whole new meaning. To see these little bundles of life grow up—week after week—right before you. How can we not be *filled with expectation*? Through our children and grandchildren, as with the baby Jesus, the future opens up.

Our Christian faith calls us to expectation and to hope.

## VII.

Every day, I wake up hoping for good news, don't you—filled with expectation about what could be.

When we are filled with expectation, we refuse to let the candle of hope burn out ...

- With health-care reform ... with peace initiatives in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- with break-throughs in medical science so we can cure cancer and other diseases
- ... for break through news on the economy ... that it will turn around and that, as a nation, we'll figure out how to adapt better to this era of globalization.

When we're filled with expectation, we can't keep ourselves from looking for the good news that, as the people of God—with all our diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, and religion—that we'll find mutually compatible ways of making life on this planet work;

that the voices of reason, faith and love will prevail ... and, over time, we'll find peaceful ways of tempering extremism in all religions and nations everywhere.

And that, together, we'll accept God's call to all of us to a higher purpose ... a purpose beyond cynicism, beyond pessimism ... a purpose with its sight always on the moral high ground ...

1. The high ground where people look out for one another ...
2. where families stay together ...
3. where justice and fairness reign for all ...
4. and where every little girl and boy—like Sofi from Siberia—has a sense of expectation about their life.

### VIII.

The Apostle Paul was filled with expectation when he wrote to the Philippians—from prison, where he might easily have been discouraged:

***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near ...***

The Lord is near indeed, friends ... in a Bethlehem manger, with the world waiting in anticipation.

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus!*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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