

Sermon – Great Expectations
Scripture – Isaiah 12: 2-6, Luke 3:7-18
Sunday, December 16, 2018
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Our first scripture reading, Isaiah 12:2-6, is a song of praise by ancient Hebrews who experienced the joy of God's salvation and who waited with hope for the day all humanity would recognize and submit themselves to God's loving and just ways. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of the word of God.

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,
For the Lord God is my strength and my might;
God has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day; Give thanks to the Lord, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted.
Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth,
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.
Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 3:7-18. As ancient Hebrews draw water from the wells of salvation and announce the character of God's governance, the Gospel of Luke introduces us to John, the Baptizer, who also draws water from the wells of salvation in baptism. Luke 3 places the ministry of John in context, historically and in light of the prophet Isaiah which we read together last week, and then gives us the most complete account of his preaching in the New Testament. John's message is a call to repentance with actions that demonstrate a changed heart. Hear now the word of the Lord.

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ 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. ⁹ Even now the ax 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."¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[a] ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Great Expectations

Text: As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts... Luke 3:15a

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the expectations that give life meaning and for the expectations you have for each of us. As we prepare for the coming of the Christ child, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Great Expectations, a novel written by Charles Dickens in 1860, is the story of Pip, an orphan boy adopted by a blacksmith's family, whose life begins with good fortune and great expectations, and who then loses both. Through this rise and fall and the many vicissitudes along the way, Pip matures, gains insight, discovers what is important in life, and comes into his own.

Pip's desire for self-improvement is the main source for the novel's title. Because he believes in the possibility of advancement in life, Pip has "great expectations" about his future. Ultimately, through the examples of the people he encounters, Pip learns that social and educational improvement are irrelevant to one's real worth and that conscience, honor, and affection are to be valued above knowledge, culture, and social standing.

In all the great expectations we each have for the possibility of advancement in life, let us never forget that the great expectation God has for each of us is to live honest lives of affection and integrity. This is the message of John, the voice crying out in the wilderness, which calls forth to us each advent.

This year, advent began with the unexpected, yet not unforeseen death of the 41st President of the United States of America, George H.W. Bush on November 30 at the age of 94. The pageantry and ceremony honoring his life was a gift to this nation and a reminder of the great expectations to which we are called during this Holy Season.

As mourners gathered in Washington to pay their respects at a state funeral at Washington National Cathedral, family, clergy, and friends eulogized the former President, recalling a life of substance and service, well lived. Former President George W. Bush remembered his father as someone who "valued character over pedigree," who "showed us how setbacks can strengthen," and who, with his optimism, "made his children believe anything was possible."

Remembering George H.W. Bush and all the ways he was able to reach beyond himself, his own interests and disappointments to put our country first was a welcome interlude in the symphony of unexpected news coming out of Washington, D.C. these days.

Perhaps this is how people felt about John, *the voice crying in the wilderness*. Throughout the biblical story the wilderness plays a significant role in the great expectations of God and God's children. It is a place of prayer and insight, challenge and temptation, revelation and growth. In the wilderness, away from the order and structure of life, one can see more clearly and respond more authentically.

The people who met John in the wilderness were drawn to his honest, straight forward and practical approach. He said what others thought but did not dare say. Precisely because of this,

they could respond to him with the same openness and honesty. When John told them not to get overly confident in their “birthrights” as religious people or become too uppity about who they were, they heard the essence of what he was saying. In the wilderness, away from the pretense of everyday life, they could respond as honestly to John as he spoke to them. They didn’t hesitate in asking him, what then shall we do? What does God expect from us?

Three times people ask John this question in response to his call for change. Three times John offers a specific guideline. Besides the honesty of John, what stands out is the specificity of his message! When the tax collector asked “What then shall I do? – John’s response is specific and concrete. This is also true of his response to the soldier! Both of whom were misusing the power their position gave them. Today’s gospel reminds us that God has unique and specific expectations for each of us through the gifts we have been given and the circumstances within our lives.

It is also true that John’s ethical teachings are by no means radical. He merely provides the practical foundation of sound behavior. He asks them to be willing to give assistance to those in need and share what they have. He emboldens them to make an honest living, tell the truth, and treat people with respect and dignity in whatever work they do!

There is often a danger, according to the Interpreter’s Commentary, that even people who think they are religious or cultured or in good social standing forget this fact...that first of all we must be honest and considerate and kind. When these fundamentals are neglected, all efforts at self-improvement are simply in vain and God’s expectations are greatly disappointed.

Today, this challenge and guideline of John is as relevant as it was two thousand years ago. During this Advent Season, may we not forget to be honest and considerate and kind, and so live up to God’s great expectations for us.

Otherwise, in our own small way our lives negate what we believe...what we celebrate this season. That is –the honesty, the consideration, the kindness of a God who would speak to us with the forthrightness of John and then come to us in the gentleness and mystery of the Christ child: “Emmanuel, God with us!” John prepared the way, but even John could not fathom the meaning of Christ’s presence in our world and in our lives.

When we find ourselves in circumstances with losses that we are powerless to change. When we have done what we can and our expectations and dreams are disappointed, God will be here, with us, holding us, honoring us and reminding us of the gifts that grow out of struggle. The God who joined us in our struggle, in the vulnerability of a child, this God will not abandon us. The God whose steadfast love and mercy is beyond our wildest dreams and expectations, this God, will not disappoint us. Amen.