

EXPECTING CHANGE: LORD WHAT SHALL WE DO?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 13, 2009

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

There is about John the Baptist a certain irresistible quality. A bit like an accident on the Long Island Expressway. You don't want to look, but on the other hand there's such a fuss, you have to.

John is the harbinger of change, the one who names the time as different. The valleys will be filled, the mountains brought low, expectations will be the reverse of what is anticipated. God is doing a new thing, John says, and the wise will be prepared.

But what an unusual man God chooses to bear that message. John is odd to say the least.

In Luke's version the Baptist not quite the wild eyed ascetic that he appears to be in Mark's or Matthew's gospels. There is none of the color commentary in Luke to tell us of John's biotic diet of locusts and wild honey, or his bizarre sense of couture, looking like a person who might have been outfitted by one of the *losing* contestants on *Project Runway*. I mean who would seriously think of putting a leather loincloth with a camel hair coat?

John is the Adam Lambert of the 1st Century, so flagrant and "out there" that we hardly know what to make of him. He is not the kind of person one would invite to a holiday party. So how did he crash ours?

And if John is an assault on the eyes, his message is no easier to hear. It is a message of repentance, or turning around, and getting ready. There are no Christmas carols playing in the background. No little shepherds in spirit gum beards with bathrobes borrowed for the pageant in John's the Baptist's Advent preparations.

He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness who shouts into the wind "Prepare the way of the Lord. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. The axe is laid to the root. The winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Fire, again. Last week we had enough of the fire. The fire that burns but purifies. Burn baby burn that which is not worthy in us. And it's the same fire that John preaches, the fire that threatens and calls us to attention.

Now if I were Luke, I would close this section on judgment, repentance and fire with some words to emphasize the gravitas of this moment in history and the response of the crowds who must have been shaken by John's words. If I were Luke, I'd have added a section saying, "And many were struck by John's preaching, dreading the judgment, fearful of the time to come, receiving his words with weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the rending of garments."

But instead, Luke closes this section describing John's forceful call to repentance with the words, "*So with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.*"

Luke's editorial comment sounds like Dana Carvey's old character on Saturday Night Live, Church Lady, who responded to every shocking thing she ever heard with the nullifying phrase, "Well isn't that special?"

Good news? What about repentance, the winnowing fork, the baptism by fire? How could this have been heard by the people as good news?

At least Luke is honest enough to note in the next sentence that none of John's message was wasted on Herod who, for the insults John hurled at Herod's home, marrying his sister-in-law and all, Herod threw John into prison.

But what about the people? What about John's message would cause Luke to make the editorial notation that "with many other exhortations John proclaimed the good news to the people?"

Maybe the one hopeful thought is that while the axe is laid to the root, and the barren tree is ready to be felled, the axe is not yet in the air. It is only poised. The blade has not yet been lifted, only positioned.

John is announcing a time of grace, a stay of execution, the pause of the axe, if you will. And Luke in his gospel will tell the story of a Jesus who goes from town to town bearing the Kingdom of God on his lips and in his heart. And as he goes, a window opens, an opportunity arrives, a moment comes when the grace of God may be experienced and life may change for the better. The gospel, seen in that light, is the story of a time of visitation in which the kingdom of heaven draws near, and wise are they who notice and make appropriate changes.

There is hope in that, there is possibility in that, there is the grace of God in that.

"So with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people."

What is particularly fascinating to me is the response of the crowds, the people who want to know what comes next and who ask John, "What must I do?" "What must I do, knowing that I don't have forever? Knowing that the axe *will* be raised and strike?" "What must I do to show that I get it, that the kingdom of God is at hand?"

I know that some of you sitting here have been in the situation of waiting in the doctor's office for a serious discussion about a difficult prognosis. The scans are in, the blood work is done, the x-rays are on the screen, the consultation with the specialist is complete, and now you have the appointment to discuss with your doctor what has been found and what comes next. "What must I do?" we ask. Is it surgery, chemo, radiation, a change in diet, some new medication? "What must I do?"

The crowds came to John for a diagnosis and a treatment plan, “What should we do?” they asked. And he answered, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Tax collectors came to him to be baptized and they asked, “Teacher what should we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

Soldiers came to him, *soldiers*, and they asked “And we, what should we do?” And he said, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

This dialogue of John and the crowds forms a kind of moral commentary on the nature of repentance. What does repentance look like? What do you have to do to ready your heart for the kingdom of heaven? What do you have to do to signal that you sense that it is close?

Well, it’s not complicated according to John the Baptist. Bear the fruits of compassion and concern for others that befit the Kingdom of God.

You know we have such a freighted understanding of repentance that we have made it seem almost foolish or irrelevant, waiting interminably for an imminent end that never comes. The New Yorker magazine has worn itself out with cartoons over the years depicting some sad John the Baptist type wearing a sandwich board, standing at an intersection announcing doom or calling for repentance.

My favorite is one that shows just such a haggard, bearded prophetic type walking along the street with a sandwich board that says “Doom! The end is near.” When above him, without him noticing, there is a large and heavy safe which is plummeting down from the sky a second away from hitting him.” Doom, indeed!

Think about these folks who went out to hear John the Baptist, leaving home and hiking out for an afternoon to hear some preaching by the River Jordan, and it was a stern message that he gave, one that announced that the axe was already laid to the root, and judgment was coming soon, *but not yet*. And it was the *not yet* that gave them hope, the realization that by the grace of God the judgment was delayed so that the kingdom could draw nearer.

“So with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Suppose somebody told you that grace was given you. That instead of the diagnosis of something terminal, there was something treatable. That yes, there had been a problem in the x-rays, but sure enough there was nothing there now, and while there was no explaining it and you will need to keep an eye on things, for the time being you are okay and you can get on with life.

That’s what John’s message was to those who heard him. We hear it as doom, but they heard it as hope. The kingdom was coming close and they had an opportunity not to miss it when it came.

“What shall we do?” they asked. And John’s answer was not so much a summary as it was a start, a beginning place. “Share what you have,” he said. That’s a start.

“You tax collectors and soldiers, don’t be so greedy. Be content with your wages, cut out the graft, stop extorting money from the little guy. Be thankful that you have enough already.” That’s a start.

My friend Bob Dunham of University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina says, “It sounds almost like something the human resources department in any corporation might tell new employees (before the union gets to them).” “Be content with your wages. Don’t be so greedy. Do the right thing. Be honest. Tell the truth.” They are not ending places, but beginning places; a place to start for a season of preparation.

Maybe we make Christianity harder than it’s meant to be. Maybe it’s easier to be faithful than we think. Frederick Buechner writes, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not something you do so much as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!”¹

A friend recommended Leif Enger’s first novel, *Peace Like a River*. It is the story of eleven year old Reuben Land the narrator in the novel, and of the small town in which he lives, Roofing, Minnesota. Reuben is a gregarious severely asthmatic boy, whose mother has abandoned him, and who is being raised by his father along with his older brother and younger sister.

As the story unfolds, Reuben’s brother is charged with two counts of murder for a seemingly justifiable cause, and then escapes; his father loses his job just before Christmas; and the Land family is faced with a most severe economic strain on top of all their other worries. Reflecting on all those dark days, Reuben remarks, “The good thing about our reduced circumstances, going into Christmas, was that our expectations changed. They lowered themselves to a worthy place.”²

“There’s a remarkable wisdom in that phrase, a wisdom that sees beyond envy to the sustaining grace that keeps us going well beyond the worlds of wishes and wants.”³

So much of the next few days is an orgy of spending, buying things for folks who already have more than they need as if somehow our love for them could be quantified in a Zhu Zhu mechanical hamster, or a scarf from Bergdorf’s, or some bling from Bulgari. Real love, the love that counts, can’t be transferred in things like that. And besides, who can afford it this year?

Maybe what we need to do this Christmas in a time of economic adjustment is
...to *lower our expectations to a worthy place*,
...to be thankful for those who are near us,
...to mend our relationships where we may,
...to seek out those whom we have driven away,
...and to be content with simpler things.

I would not preach contentment to those who are oppressed. To those who have felt the sting of the landlord's inflexibility or inattention. To those who are struggling to keep more than one job going just to pay for rent and food. To those who are working twelve and fourteen hours a day just to keep a job. To those who are barely making it on food stamps and pantry handouts, I would not preach contentment. To them I say, the wheat shall be separated from the chaff one day, and those of integrity and perseverance shall have their reward. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

But to those whose burden is not that they have too little, but that they have too much, I would hold out John's call to simplicity, to contentment and self-sacrifice for others.

His understanding that it is in the simple things that we do in compassion and service to others that the kingdom of God draws near and we prepare ourselves for the coming of the One who was born a child in a manger, in the back stall of a borrowed room in a rude barn, on the darkest night of the year in the least likely place in town.

There is a grinding down of the spirit that I sense among us this season, a weariness of the year that is passing that nearly broke us all. The signs are that people are spending less this season, making more gifts at home, baking cookies and making candy than in years past, passing them along in a box with a ribbon. And if there is a good side to this changed circumstance in which we find ourselves, perhaps it is that we have lowered our expectations of this Christmas to a worthy place, so that we can appreciate family a bit more this year unencumbered by as many toys that lie broken on the floor twenty minutes after they are opened.

Maybe we can understand a little better that it is not gifts that we give but the gifts that we are to each other that are the most important part of Christmas. Maybe we can appreciate how much God has done for us in Jesus Christ if we do a little more for each other and a little less for ourselves.

Fred Craddock, whom I admire so much as a teacher and preacher, and now 81 years old, has written an autobiography entitled *Reflections on My Call to Preach*. In the book he describes the meager circumstances he experienced as a boy growing up in rural Tennessee, sleeping three to a bed on many a cold winter's night.

His father was an alcoholic and a heavy smoker. A man who had some education but who never really accomplished very much in his life except for his devotion to his family which was sometimes hard to see through the booze and the consequent poverty of their life.

Craddock writes of his father and one particular Christmas of import.

Perhaps my best Christmas [writes Fred] was the one that seemed the worst until some years later when I learned the mystery of it. The Depression was at its worst; the family purse was empty. I had overheard Momma say to Daddy that there would be no Christmas. There was no

way. And yet Christmas morning our shoe boxes, set in a row anticipating Santa, held their annual goodies: an apple in each, a tangerine in each, raisins still on the stem in each; a box of sparklers in each, a packet of Black Cat fire crackers in each. We were in business. Merry Christmas! How did it happen? I had the answer about ten years later. Momma said Daddy used a pair of pliers to pull one of his molars. That molar had a gold crown, put there by an Army dentist during World War I. Daddy removed the crown and went to town where he sold the gold for enough to provide gifts from Santa Claus. Daddy never spoke of it and as long as he lived I kept his secret.⁴

Bear fruits worthy of repentance, John said. Prepare the way of the Lord. The kingdom is near.

And what shall we do? Lower our expectations to a worthy place. Do what we can to make ready for the One whose reign is sped by acts of kindness and deeds of self giving wherein the kingdom of heaven appears. Not a bad thing to keep in mind on this December Sunday in a season that the world measures by fourteen shopping days till Christmas.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2009.

¹ Frederick Buechner, **Wishful Thinking**. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 79.

² Leif Enger, **Peace Like a River**. (New York: Grove Press, 2001) 126

³ Bob Dunham, 2003 Moveable Feast Paper. Unpublished, p 6.

⁴ Fred Brenning Craddock, **Reflections on My Call to Preach**. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009) 44.