

**“Great Expectations”**

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Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation,  
and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might  
be the Messiah,

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 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 unquench-  
able fire.”

... 21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had  
been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And  
a voice came from heaven,

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

**EXPECTING A MESSIAH**

The Scripture says that the people were filled with expectation.

They thought that the Messiah was coming  
and coming soon.

And some asked,  
“Is John the Messiah?”

They didn’t say it out loud.  
That might be dangerous.

The Romans and King Herod  
wouldn't want someone  
in the kingdom making messianic claims.

But some of them wondered...in their hearts.

Could John be the One?

The people had great expectations  
when it came to John.

But, John knew better.  
He knew that he wasn't the One.

He was the voice crying in the wilderness.  
He prepared the way.  
He called the people to repent of their sin  
and be baptized.

But, John knew that he was not the Messiah.  
The Messiah would be quite different from John,  
or anyone else for that matter.

According to John, the Messiah would be greater.  
He would be more powerful.

In fact, John said,  
"He's going to be so much greater than me...."

And the people said,  
"Tell us John, how much greater will he be."

"He'll be so much greater than me  
that I won't even be worthy to untie his shoelaces."

Wow. That's pretty great.

John made the contrast between himself and the Messiah who was coming  
crystal clear.  
John baptized with water,

but the one who was coming, the Messiah,  
...he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

And, according to John, this Messiah would bring a word of judgment.

He ministry would be like a winnowing fork,  
separating the wheat from the chaff,  
...the good from the bad.

According to John,  
this Messiah would take no prisoners.  
The chaff would be burned up  
with "unquenchable fire".

No wonder the people came in droves to be baptized by John in Jordan  
River.

When judgment is coming,  
you better get right with God.

You better wash away those sins.  
The Messiah that John and the people expected was a ferocious Messiah.

The Messiah that they expected would be take on the powers that be and  
win a military victory.

NOT THE MESSIAH THEY EXPECTED

But, the Messiah John and the people expected was not the Messiah they  
got.

We learn (in the verses that our lectionary passage for today omits) that the  
ministry of John the Baptist would soon come to an end.

He dared to criticize the evil ways of King Herod.  
And as we all know, It never ends well when you criticize the person in  
power.

The King threw John in jail and added another evil deed to his ever growing  
list. (Luke 3:19-20)

But, before that happened, in our lesson for today we learned that when all those other people were coming to be baptized by John, Jesus also came.

And Jesus was baptized along with all those other people who were trying to wash away their sins and escape the coming judgment.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus is baptized, no one seems to notice.

Jesus is baptized along with everyone else.

He just another person in a long lines of sinners coming down to the river to pray, repent, wash away the old life and start a new life.

Unlike the other gospel stories,  
John doesn't object to the baptism of Jesus.

He doesn't point out Jesus and say,  
"Behold the Lamb of God."

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is not recognized  
by John or anyone else.  
He's just one of the crowd.

There is nothing to distinguish Jesus from all the others being baptized that day.

And maybe that's the important point.

John the Baptist preaches  
about the power of this coming Messiah.  
He'll be so great that John won't even be worthy to untie his shoes.  
He'll be so great that he'll baptize the world with fire and separate the wheat from the chaff.

Then Jesus comes to be baptized  
and nobody notices.  
Nobody notices because Jesus is not what John or the crowd is expecting.

He's not a fire breathing, all powerful military leader.  
He's just another face in the crowd that has come to be baptized.

## WADE IN THE WATER

We shouldn't be surprised.  
Isn't that what we mean  
when we talk about the incarnation?

God himself is with us in the flesh.  
God is with us as we come to seek forgiveness.

Why did all those people come to John for baptism?  
They wanted to repent of their sins.  
They wanted to go in a new direction.

In fact they were desperate to go in a new direction.  
For them, the future looked bleak, so they pinned their hopes on this  
strange looking prophet.

They put their life in the hands of  
this voice crying in the desert.

They were baptized by John in the Jordan River,  
and that baptism was a symbol of their repentance.

But, little did they know,  
the one who would save them from their sins  
was right beside them in the cold waters of the Jordan River.

I think of that spiritual, Wade in the Water.  
It goes, "Wade in the water.  
Wade in the water children.  
Wade in the water.

God's gonna trouble the water."

I have often wondered what the songwriter meant when he wrote, "God's  
gonna trouble the water."

Maybe God "troubled" the water that day  
when his Son, Jesus entered the water.

God in Christ became a part of this sin sick world,  
and that provided the cure for what ails us.

He who was without sin,  
went down to the river to be baptized with sinners.

And the waters of baptism  
have been a powerful sign  
and seal of God's forgiveness ever since.

## YOU ARE MY SON

I said that nobody noticed when Jesus was baptized with the crowd that  
day.

That's not entirely true.

Somebody did notice.  
Can you guess who?  
The Lord noticed.

The Bible tells us that after Jesus was baptized,  
he was praying.

Heaven opened.  
The Holy Spirit descended  
"in bodily form" like a dove.  
And a voice from heaven proclaimed,

"You are my Son, the beloved;  
with you I am well pleased."

What is the significance of this voice from heaven?

First of all, it lets the reader of Luke's gospel know something about Jesus.

He is God's Son.  
He is loved.  
God is pleased with him.

But, this also is a revelation about us.

My theology professor once told us that Jesus gives us a true picture of God.

But, Jesus also gives us a picture of what it means to truly human.

In Jesus we learn not only the truth about God,  
but also the truth about ourselves.

From the very beginning God loves Jesus and is pleased with him not because of anything that he has done to this point. God loves him and is pleased with him because he is God's Son.

And all of Jesus' ministry will flow from this divine revelation.

And this divine revelation applies to us as well.

## UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR OUR CHILDREN

It's like when a couple has a baby.  
Many of you have experienced this.

How do we feel when we first hold that baby in our arms?

We love them.  
We are pleased and proud of them.

And soon our friends and family will receive many pictures on their cell phones.

Why do we feel that way?  
Well, it obvious.

This is our daughter.  
This is our son.

And no matter what happens from that point on.  
This will always be true.

We will love them because they are our children.

Is there anyone else who will love us  
like our parents?

The baptism of Jesus tells us that there is One who loves us like that.

God loves us like that.

Just as it was for Jesus, in our baptism God calls us,  
God names us, God loves us.

God is well pleased with us  
...not because of what we've done,  
but because of who we are at birth.

We are God's children.  
God has given us birth.

We are not her by accident.  
God loves us and has a plan for our life.

## LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Like all children we will make mistakes.  
Sometimes make terrible mistakes.

And just as good parents make sure  
children learn from their mistakes  
...so God will make sure we learn as well.

That's where John's separating  
the wheat from the chaff comes in.

God loves us so much that he won't let us get away with a life that is less  
than it should be.  
God burns up the chaff in our life  
because God loves us.

But, no matter what happens we are still God's children.

Our loving Lord is waiting for us,  
ready to forgive and put us on a new path.

You see repentance and forgiveness are not a condition of God's love.

We don't have to do something to earn God's love.

Repentance and forgiveness  
are a result of God's love.

To put it another way, in God's Kingdom we can always go home again.

Home is hard to define these days.  
People often have to move in order to take a job.  
I saw on the news the other day that folks on average move nine or ten  
times during their life.

Many of us don't have a sense of place.

Add to that the fact that fewer families remain intact, and you can under-  
stand why so many of us feel isolated and alone.

We often have a sense of uncertainty.  
We're just not sure of our place in the world.

There's this craving to know who we are.

We want to go home,  
but we're not sure where to go.

God in Christ shows us the way back home.

Baptism fills our need for identity.

In baptism we learn that we are God's children.  
We belong to God's family. That is our true home.

## REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

When my wife wants to remember something,  
she puts her watch on her other wrist.

That watch on the “wrong” wrist is a reminder of something important.

Well, baptism is like that.  
It’s a reminder of something important.

Every time we baptize an infant, a child or an adult we are reminded of our own identity.

We are God’s children.  
God loves us and calls us to spread  
that message of love in word and deed.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, was plagued at times with a sense of guilt and despair. He kept a sign over his desk that read, “Remember you have been baptized”.

And he would often touch his forehead and say, “Martin, remember, you have been baptized.”

The life of faith begins with God’s grace.

And we cannot think about  
and talk about that grace too much.

When it comes to the Christian life,  
God’s grace always wins

Our baptism is a sign and seal of that grace.  
We need to remember it every day.

Try this.

Whenever you take a shower and are about to begin your day, or when you wash your hands,  
remember your baptism.

Say something like,  
 “I am God’s child who is sent  
 to make a difference in the world.”

Consider that homework.  
 Try that...just for one week.

“I am God’s child who is sent  
 to make a difference in the world.”

I really believe that doing this one thing can change how you look at your-  
 self and those you meet that day.

## MY BOY, MY GIRL

Joanna Adams in a sermon on this passage remembered the time she saw  
 a theater production of Clarence Jordan’s Cotton Patch Gospel.

In that production  
 an actor named Tom Key played God.

Tom (as God) stood on a ladder on the stage.  
 The actor portraying Jesus stood below him,  
 looking up with hope and maybe a bit of anxiety as he prayed.

And “God” from the ladder calls out  
 (in a voice Joanna said you could hear all the way down to Peachtree  
 Street):

“You are my boy, Jesus.  
 I am so proud of you!”

She said, “I could feel in the marrow of my bones the exuberant love and  
 approval in the actor’s voice, and I believe something similar happens be-  
 tween God and us in our own baptisms.”

Just like parents looking at their newborn for the first time, the Lord says of  
 us,

“This one’s mine.  
 She looks just like me.

He's made in my image.  
Don't you see it?"

God chooses to bring us into the world.  
God's grace claims us at our baptism  
and reclaims us throughout our life.

We need to remember that promise.  
We need to take comfort from that promise.

We need to be challenged by that promise.

Here's an image that can help you remember our lesson for today.  
Imagine God standing on that tall ladder.

And he shouts down to you loud enough that folks can hear the message  
on 192,

"Do you see that boy down there?  
Do you see that girl down there?"

I am so proud of her.  
I am so proud of him.

He's not perfect.  
And she's not perfect either.

But, they're mine,  
and I love them very much.  
I have great expectations for them.

That was the message  
when God came to earth in Jesus.  
And that's still the message today.

If you forget everything else, remember this.  
"You are God's daughter. You are God's son."

It'll be enough to sustain you, comfort you, and bring you joy every day.  
Amen.