

Advent Worship Series
Sermon Title: “Filled With Expectation”

13 December 2015: Advent 3

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

Preaching Text: Luke 3:7-18

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“We never live; we are always in the expectation of living”

— (Voltaire 1694—1778).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

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? 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. 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 he 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, 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 unquenchable fire.” 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people (Luke 3:7-18).

Luke pictures the boy Jesus as wise. Once, Luke writes, “They found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). Note that today’s text stresses questions. A good question at the right time creates new visions by which we become better disciples. Yet we often deflect questions and this stifles mature faith. God expects seekers to ask robust questions. In good conscience we ask, for while God’s “ways [are not] my ways” (paraphrase of Isaiah 55:8), we never get closer to God than when we ask sincere questions.

John preaches and the crowds come—to be baptized. John troubles them calling them “a brood of vipers,” which is no way to begin a sermon, but rather promises chaos. Vipers were wilderness creatures and John’s insult was the equivalent of calling a Texan “a snake in the

grass.”

With the crowd’s attention fixed, John commands repentance. In Greek (*metenoia*) it means “returning,” or “coming back to the covenant.” Or “to turn around” or “do an about face.” John told the people they were missing the mark. Amused they thought “We are the chosen people—we are children of Abraham!” Then John sneers, “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.” Our introduction to John’s sermon ends abruptly as John suggests that there are two kinds of trees: fruitful and unfruitful. Into the fire go the bad trees. John’s implication seems clear.

After John’s blunt message, Luke describes three groups that ask John questions in response: “What then should we do?” John’s answer is direct. Those in the crowd who ask “What then should we do?” should share what they have. To share with others is a sign of a fruit of repentance. An Ebenezer Scrooge-like story clarifies why sharing is a sign of repentance. Those who do not share do not have Christ’s spirit.

A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town’s most successful miser. The person in charge of contributions called him to persuade him to contribute. “Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least \$500,000, you give not a penny to charity. Wouldn’t you like to give back to the community in some way, Sir?”

The miser mulled this over for a moment and replied, “First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has medical bills that are several times her annual income?”

Embarrassed, the United Way representative mumbled, “Um . . . No.”—or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?” The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology but was interrupted, “—or that my sister’s husband died in a traffic accident,” the miser’s voice rising in indignation, “leaving her penniless with three children?!”

The mortified United Way rep, utterly beaten, said simply, “I had no idea”

On a roll, the miser cut him off once again: “. . . so if I don’t give any money to them, why should I give any to you?”

John the Baptizer knew that people with a repentant heart will share God’s blessing with others. The “crowds” are ordinary people; John thought they should have selfless concern for the

disadvantaged.

Besides the generic crowd, Luke tells us that John the Baptizer confronted both tax collectors and soldiers. Luke tells us that, “Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Tax collectors bid on tax districts and made a living by paying the Romans a set amount—keeping any overage for themselves. Thus, if collecting more than prescribed, they pocketed the often substantial difference.

Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” Judea despised soldiers, as they did tax collectors. The “soldiers” were most likely Jews in the service of Herod Antipas. John tells them that they should follow the emperor’s guidelines on military conduct. The answer to “What should we do?” suggests that following rule is adequate. Just treat other people as human beings. People of faith must ask again and again in openness to God’s will as when the soldiers un-expectantly asked “What should we do?” The quality of our questions determines the quality of our lives.

Bill Caudill, the fine architect, teacher, and author, served for many years on the Herman Miller [an exceptionally successful furniture company] board of directors. In that role, Bill made a unique and priceless contribution. [As Max Dupree tells it] . . . Selecting Bill for our board was, as it is for every member, a very serious matter. We work from a written statement of criteria for board membership, and we seek a diverse group of members so that the diverse needs of the corporation can be met. When I went to Houston to ask Bill whether he might consider serving on the board, he was immediately interested.

An architect, Bill was well aware of Herman Miller’s reputation, but he wasn’t going to consent immediately. He had some *questions* of his own he wanted to answer. He wanted to visit Zeeland, Michigan, the community that hosts our corporate headquarters and main manufacturing site. And on the appointed day of his visit, he walked into my office midmorning, shook my hand, and said that yes, he would serve on Herman Miller’s board of directors.

You can imagine my curiosity about how he had arrived at his decision. I asked if he would like to discuss anything further. He told me that he had found out everything he needed to know that morning at Bosch’s restaurant in Zeeland, one of those typical Midwestern, small-town institutions where local folks gather to sort out hometown matters and world affairs.

Bill had joined one of the groups he found at a large table and had quizzed them about Herman Miller and its standing in the community. He told them that he was being considered for a position on Herman Miller’s board of directors. What did they think of that? After talking to Bill, understanding who he was, and answering his questions, together they agreed that Bill should accept the position. Then he had driven to the local cemetery

to make sure that only live plants and fresh flowers were allowed on the graves. He said, “I couldn’t work in a town where they use plastic flowers” (Max Dupree, *Leadership Jazz*, Dell Books, New York, 1992, p. 122-124).

These are the kinds of questions that define the quality of one’s life. When the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers asked good questions of John the Baptizer, I wonder if John thought the time for the Kingdom of God had arrived.

The insights garnered for daily life reside in our questions about how faith and life overlap. To ponder such questions reveals a willingness not to settle for simple answers. It also spurs us on to better and more compassionate discipleship. We embrace our questions as people of faith. I have friend who used to pastor Oklahoma City’s Church of the Servant. Because Christmas is all about the hope we want from the questions we ask, here is soldier’s Christmas story from long past:

Many years ago when our country was involved in the Korean Conflict, a little detachment of Marines faced a hopeless future. It was a cold that night, bitterly cold, 42 degrees below zero if you can imagine it. And it wouldn’t be long until morning would come and the onslaught would begin. A correspondent was with these Marines, and he noticed a big fellow who was eating beans with his trench knife. The correspondent went over to him and began talking. And at one point, he asked him a rather philosophical question. He asked, “If I was God and I could grant you anything in the world that you wanted, what would it be?”

The big Marine looked up from his beans and thought for a moment. Then he responded with a profound reply: “Anything in the world? That’s easy. I would want you to give me the gift of tomorrow (abridged from Norman Neaves’ sermon, “They Expected the Worst, But Look What They Got,” 12 December 1999).