

What Do You Expect?

Luke 3: 7-18

Home Moravian Church, December 15, 2024

When Bill and I lived in downtown West Jefferson we were witness to the phenomenon called cruising: a weekly parade of cars full of teenagers, driving slowly around and around a three-block route for hours. Since Bill and I lived at one end of this route, we saw it all and heard it all, including a very annoying car horn that played “Dixie,” and also a street preacher, who harangued the cruisers from the corner across from our house. Though his voice got ragged as the evening went on, his volume was impressive, and he was there every week. He was a man who lived in expectation. His choice to be there was no doubt based on his expectation that the world could end that very night. Sometimes, in the context of the cruising, I agreed with him.

Advent urges us to live in expectation, praying as we do in an Advent hymn, “Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear.” Our Moravian Star is a symbol of Advent expectation, as we await the coming of the light of Christ. We expect joy.

But the street preacher in West Jefferson seemed to expect doom. That’s what he talked about: not only the likelihood of destruction, but how much we deserved it. He was a student of the American 18th century school of preaching exemplified by Jonathan Edwards in his famous 1741 sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Having read that ferocious sermon, which informs me—this is a quote—that God *abhors* me—I know that *nothing* could induce me to turn out for the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. As far as I could tell, nobody turned out for the street preacher in West Jefferson, either.

So I wonder: When John the Baptist was preaching by the Jordan, why did he draw crowds? What did the crowds expect? Would we hurry to hear a street preacher calling us a

brood of vipers and making insinuations about the death of certain trees, or chaff in flames?

John was not a welcoming preacher; in fact, he asked his congregation what they were doing there. He asked whose warning had brought them crawling his way like snakes fleeing a fire. Had the crowds come expecting welcome, the very first crowd would have passed on a message to the people behind them, and John's ministry would have been dead in the water.

Maybe the crowd came expecting entertainment. When I was in college, a skinny guy in a robe stood around preaching in front of the student union for a few days, and crowds of students entertained themselves and each other by harassing and mocking and laughing at him. To his credit, he never seemed discouraged.

What was going on for the crowds in Luke, that they came looking for what John was preaching? Probably we need some context. The great preacher Fred Craddock has said that in Luke's gospel, nothing happens without antecedents.¹ There's an initial impulse for everything. For Luke, the antecedent is often the context of the times. That's why the early chapters of Luke's gospel include so many historical settings. No doubt Luke expected his readers, based on their experience, to have a mental picture of life under Emperor Tiberius, King Herod, and high priests Annas and Caiaphas, just as you and I might have a mental picture of the US under presidents we remember.

But if our knowledge is too limited for Luke's historical context, we can still get a mental picture; because the antecedent of John's preaching is really the human context, which seems to change rather little over centuries.

We can learn a lot from the conversation between John and his audience. They don't shy away from his berating; they don't even deny that they might be vipers. Instead, they ask him

¹ In *Luke*, from the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 45.

how they can be something else. What they expect, apparently, is an answer to a very specific question; and John does not disappoint. Let's go back to the text and listen:

...The crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." 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." 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."

Even without historical context, we hear some familiar concerns. Basing our discernment on our human context, we can readily imagine this conversation's antecedent: an environment of selfishness, dishonesty, and abuse of power. What do people living in such a context come to expect? Do they expect to carry on their lives surrounded by generosity, integrity, and a society built on a shared concern for the common good? Or does their context, which likely comes down from the top through the officials named by Luke, teach them to expect that life will always be a fight for resources, that someone is always waiting to take dishonest advantage, and that whatever they have, someone undeserving will soon steal it from them? Our expectations, whatever they may be, are the basis for our choices, and on those choices, we build our lives in a way that works for us.

Why do people behave the way they do? Answer: Because it's working for them. That is part one of a principle I learned in my chaplaincy training. Part two asks, When do people change the way they behave? Answer: When it's no longer working for them.

Why did people come in crowds to hear John the Baptist? Likely because their behavior was no longer for them. Likely because the choices that had seemed like a reasonable response to their expectations had led, eventually, to dysfunction and distress.

But in distress, wouldn't they look for comfort? Evidently not; else they wouldn't have kept coming to John. They wouldn't have turned out in *crowds* for "you brood of vipers" and "the ax is lying at the root of the trees" and, toward the end of today's passage, warnings about winnowing hooks and chaff and unquenchable fire. The narrator calls this "good news," but why? It sure doesn't sound like comfort. But then, maybe snakes in a fire don't look first for comfort. They look first for a way out of the fire.

Maybe crowds came to John looking for a way out of the fire of their lives: a flame that took hold in a context of suspicious and hostile expectations, leading to self-protective choices, leading to a struggle for satisfaction that their choices would not permit. Maybe they came to John expecting a way out.

This was, in its way, a reasonable expectation. The antecedent to John's preaching was a centuries-old system in which one could atone for sin by offering up a prescribed sacrifice: a dove, a lamb, an ox. Even today, people are prone to look for formulas that might sort of, you know, balance the scales with God: I give *this* so that God will do *that*. The human context, after all, teaches us to expect transaction.

And John did urge the crowds toward sacrifice: but not the kind you burn on an altar. John urged sacrificial action: *ethical* sacrifice, a willingness to give up some of one's own comfort to show love to one's neighbor. Not a transaction. A surrender.

But remember what Fred Craddock said about Luke's gospel? Nothing without antecedents? An ethical action must arise from the antecedent of genuine repentance. Look behind today's text, going back to verse 3, to remind ourselves that John was "proclaiming a baptism of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*." Ethical action arises from the broken heart you sacrifice to God in repentance. As it says in Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifice acceptable to God

is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Repentance is where our change begins.

But it’s not where *God’s* change begins; because no change in God was ever necessary. Despite what Jonathan Edwards preached, God loves you, has always loved you, will always love you. God just invites you out of the fire, as John invited the crowd into the water.

When you’re fleeing a fire, your first hope is for a way out; but maybe the ultimate hope and expectation of snakes fleeing a fire is water. Maybe that’s what brought the crowds to John, as he stood on the bank of the Jordan, offering baptism as a sign of the forgiveness that God always expects to extend. As Fred Craddock says, “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news.” Craddock reminds us that the expectation of the one with the winnowing hook is not to burn the chaff, but to save the wheat.²

Even if we are not top scholars of history, we recognize the context in which John preaches; because if history repeats itself, well, so does humanity. And when you look around at human beings, well, what do you expect? Whatever you expect, that’s where your choices are coming from.

John’s preaching creates a new expectation, of a history that does not repeat itself. An expectation of grace. An expectation of a power coming toward us, a power so great that it lifts up valleys and brings down mountains, leveling our differences, making all the world a level plain. Let Christ be our hope. Let Christ be our expectation. Let us choose accordingly, as we wait expectantly for the glory of the Lord; which, from a level plain, we can all see together.

Amen.

² Craddock, 49.

