

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

January 13, 2019

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Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

SCRIPTURE

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, 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. 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."

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

The Word of the Lord... **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

Last October was the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Grover's Mill. Grover's Mill is located about five miles southeast of Princeton, NJ. It is not really a town or village, just an intersection where Cranbury Rd., Clarksville Rd. and Millstone Rd., all come together. Today there is a lawyer's office, an auto repair shop and a horse riding school nearby. But back in a wooded area on private property, there is what remains of an old water tower. The local legend is that there are bullet holes in this tower, because that is where the battle took place.

It was on October 30, 1938, when *The Mercury Theater of the Air*, had Orson Welles broadcast an updated version of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. Now H.G. Wells was British and set his science fiction story in the remote English countryside. Orson Welles' radio version of the story was not done as fiction but rather he made it sound as if it were a live news report of Martians landing here on U.S. soil. The story goes that Orson Welles, grabbed a map that just happened to be New Jersey and randomly pointed at some spot that turned out to be Grover's Mill. That became the site of his alien invasion. Supposedly, after the broadcast, frightened residents grabbed their firearms and went out looking for these Martians, which were described as gigantic spider like creatures with fat bodies and long legs. There in the moonlight they looked up and saw what they were absolutely certain was a horrible Martian monster, and so they opened fire.

So often we do not see what is really there. Instead we see what we expect to see. Those good citizens of Grover's Mill had lived in that area all their lives. They had driven by that water tower every day. Yet on that night they were not expecting to see a water tower. In the dark, they were expecting to see a monster, and so that is exactly what they saw. In 1988, on the 50th anniversary of the radio broadcast a monument was erected in a little park in Grover's Mill commemorating the site where the Martians landed and were then frightened off by the locals.

Expectations can have a great influence on us. We shape reality to fit what we want to be true rather than being objective about the facts before us. Our scripture for this morning begins with people being anything but objective. It says, “As the people were filled with *expectation*, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah...” They were filled with great expectations. Let me see if I can explain what was going on and why they had these ideas about John the Baptist.

At this point in history, people were looking for the Messiah. In previous generations there had been a deliberate attempt by the Greek conquerors to completely obliterate Jews as a people and a culture and force them to conform to the Greek way of doing things. Many Jews suffered and died under intense persecution, but their courage and determination caused a backlash. Down through the years the Jews became more and more proud of their identity. There was a resurgence in practicing their religion in a pure, unadulterated manner, and in studying the sacred writings and traditions of their ancestors.

The Romans had since become the dominant power in the area, and they were more tolerant of cultural differences. As long as you paid your taxes, obeyed Roman laws, and didn't cause any trouble, they didn't care much if you worshipped in your own religion or followed local traditions and customs. So people began to explore what it really meant to be a Jew, and out of this national and religious pride came the various Jewish factions that we call the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes.

As part of this rediscovery of their heritage, even the common people became interested in the writings of the ancient prophets. They began to talk about how many of the religious thinkers from centuries before predicted that someday God would send a special deliverer who would set all things right. This person would overthrow the evil powers of this world and return Israel to the glory days of King David. As the Roman control became tighter, as taxes increased, as the entire political-economic-religious system became more enmeshed, more corrupt, more oppressive, people began to hope and pray that God would act, that the Anointed One would appear, take control and set them free.

Then along came John the Baptist. Matthew's gospel describes his appearance, dressed in rough, coarse clothes. It is likely that John took the vow of a Nazarene, which meant he never shaved or cut his hair. If you look at the first chapter of 2nd Kings, you will find that the Baptizer's appearance was similar to one of the greatest prophets. He looked the way many imagined the prophet Elijah must have looked. But there was more. He not only looked the part, he talked the talk. He talked about the coming day of wrath, when the enemies of God (i.e. the Romans, right?) would be destroyed forever. He was fearless, accusing even the cruel and powerful King Herod of sexual misconduct. He preached about repentance and how everything had to be changed around, and how nothing would be right until everything was overturned.

It is not hard then to see why the expectations were running so high when it came to John the Baptist. Just as those residents of Grover's Mill saw what they expected to see in the moonlight, so the people standing on the banks of the Jordan saw what they were longing to see in John. He matched exactly what everyone was looking for in their messiah want-ads. He looked like a messiah. He talked like a messiah. He acted like a messiah. He had to be THE Messiah, didn't he? But when they pushed John on this point, he replied, “...one, more powerful than I, is coming.”

Now you would think that would be encouraging. You would think that there would be even greater expectations, and so the people would be more than ready when Jesus came along. You would think that John had laid the groundwork so thoroughly that everyone would clearly see who Jesus was and what he was trying to do. Yet, throughout the four gospels you see that people are completely baffled by Jesus. You do not find them asking very often, “Could he be the Messiah?” On occasion, yes, but most of the time the reaction seems to be, “Who is this guy, anyway? Who does he think he is?”

Because the people were expecting a messiah to look the way they thought a messiah should look, they overlooked Jesus. They were looking for a prophet who would call down the wrath of God. What they got was an itinerant preacher who said things like, “Blessed are the peace makers,” and “Turn the other cheek.” They were expecting a great judge who would sift away all of the chaff and stubble, leaving only that which is pure and holy. What they got was a wandering teacher who hung out with lowlifes and healed on the Sabbath day. They were expecting a hero king like David. What they got was a storyteller who told parables about seeds and sheep, who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and finally allowed himself to be nailed to a cross. Jesus was not at all who or what they expected and so they were confused and bewildered by what he did.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all begin the public ministry of Jesus with him going to John to be baptized. Theologians have written volumes about the significance of this act. Why Jesus decided to do this is a profound question that we cannot begin to completely answer. So let me give you one idea to think about this morning. With all three accounts of Jesus’ baptism, the gospel writers try to make it very clear that the human expectations surrounding Jesus were not what mattered. What was important was his identity established by God. It did not matter what people thought about Jesus. It did not matter that he did not match their expectations. What did matter was what God said about Jesus. In all accounts we read of the voice of God declaring from heaven, “This is my son, my child, the one who is loved. I am pleased with what he is doing.” With this, Jesus’ identity is clearly established and he can go on and do the things he had to do.

All of us have to deal with the expectations of others. Our parent, our families, our friends, people we go to school with or work with, even perfect strangers, all expect certain things from us. They expect us to act a certain way, and do certain things. Sometimes these expectations can be positive, inspiring us to do more than we thought we could possibly accomplish. Sometimes these expectations are negative. They are overwhelming, leaving us frustrated and discouraged. Sometimes these expectations are simply counterproductive, pushing us to do things we do not want to do, becoming something we don’t want to be. But most of us here this morning have been baptized, and that changes everything. In our baptism, the expectations of others no longer matter much. In our baptism, our identity changes forever. Through our baptism it is God who declares, “You are my child. You are loved. You have the capability of doing things that please me greatly.” That is the only thing that really matters.

Let me close with the story of someone who was clear in this identity. George Washington Carver was born a slave in Missouri. He grew up with many hardships and difficulties, but when he was 28 he enrolled at Simpson College here in Iowa, and when he was 34, he graduated from Iowa State with a masters degree in horticulture. He went on to establish Tuskegee Institute with Booker T. Washington. His scientific research into agricultural products derived from the peanut, sweet potato, and cotton byproducts have far reaching implications even until today.

In January of 1921, exactly 98 years ago, George Washington Carver went to Washington, D.C, to a hearing of the Ways and Means Committee, hoping to explain his work on the peanut. He assumed that such a high-level committee would deal with the business at hand with dignity and proper decorum. He was shocked when speakers who got up ahead of him to make their presentations were harassed and treated rudely. As a black man, he was last on the list and so, after three days of waiting, he finally walked up the aisle to speak. On the way up, one of the committee member said, quite loudly for all to hear, "I suppose you have plenty of peanuts and watermelon to keep you happy!" Carver ignored the remark as a stupid crack, although it stung. He was further appalled to see another committee member sitting there with his hat on and his feet up on the table. When the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee told the member to take of his hat, he replied, "Down where I come from we don't accept a negro's testimony, and I don't see what this fellow can say that has any bearing on this committee." Only "negro" was not the word that was used.

At this point, facing such distorted expectations, George Washington Carver was ready to just walk away and go back home to Alabama. However, later he was to write in his autobiography, "Whatever they said of me, I knew that I was a child of God, and so I said to myself inwardly, 'Almighty God, let me carry out your will.'" He went to the podium and was told that he had twenty minutes to speak. Carver opened up his display case and began to explain his project. Among other talents, he was an engaging public speaker, and so those twenty minutes went all too quickly. The chairman rose and asked for an extension so he could continue his presentation, which he did for another hour and 45 minutes. They voted him four more extensions and he spoke for several hours. At the end, they all stood and applauded him for what he had to say. This was all because he knew who he was. George Washington Carver was clear on his identity and he refused to allow their expectations to affect the direction he had chosen.

"Whatever they said of me, I knew I was a child of God." That is what baptism is all about. That is what Jesus' baptism by John was all about. That is what your baptism was about. I do not know all the things people expect of you. I do not know if you feel encouraged and lifted up or if you feel overwhelmed and beaten down. I do not know if you are pushed into areas where you do not want to go, or if you struggle to go beyond the limitations others try to force on you. But this I do know: whatever others may say or think, you are a child of God. You are loved with a never ending love. You have within you the capacity to please God.

That is gospel. That is good news. That is why we are baptized, and that is why we come here to this place to worship week after week. We come to be reminded again and again of who we are. We come to touch the water and feel the Spirit sweeping over us. We come to hear the story of just how much we are loved. God loves us so much that God gives us all. God gives his very self. There should be no question of who you are. You are God's very own. You are loved beyond measure. Nothing will ever change that. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.