

Luke 3: 15-22  
"Expectations"  
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Gnats flew patterns around his matted beard.

The desert left trails of salt which disappeared into his hairy face.

He was tired, but at the same time, full of fire.

His weariness stemmed not from the draining heat of the Judean sun, but from the growing burden he carried. His words weighed him down.

John could give them water and the promise of forgiveness, but he could not give them what he, too, sought.

The longing in the wet faces of those he brought up out of the water asked him if he was the one for whom they waited.

He tried to hide his own disappointment at not finding the Messiah among the people.

He shouted the promise all the more so as to convince even himself.

His mind wandered somewhere far away into the desert, though his body was waist deep in the slowly-moving flow of the Jordan.

At first he did not even see the pilgrim who knelt before him in the river waiting to be baptized.

But then he caught the sunlight reflection from the beads of sweat on the man's face and he recognized him.

"I need to be baptized by you!" he managed to speak. In the background there was thunder, and a white dove down near them on its sweeping light.

Still dripping with the water of John's baptism, the pilgrim walked toward the desert, leaving behind the solitary prophet drowning with joy.

He was here! He has come!

John splashed water onto his own face as one who had finished a long journey.

*(From: Jody Seymour, Finding God between the lines)*

On our liturgical calendar we have just gone through a little bit of a time lapse of about 30 years. Scripture has just taken us from the Magi visiting the baby Jesus last week to the beginning of Jesus ministry which is marked by his baptism.

What is interesting is that the gospel of Luke, while having been very detailed and elaborate in its retelling of the story of Jesus' birth, makes nothing special of telling of Jesus' baptism, which I think must have been quite something.

So I took the liberty helping us imagining what it might have been like – for John and for Jesus. It speaks to and imagines that there is more to the story; more to the promises made at Jesus' birth; that in fact these promises of the Messiah with us, would come true, and that this would change everything.

The passage in Luke begins with, "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah ....people were holding on to that expectation of a Messiah entering their world to save them from the oppressive powers that were. When John baptized the road dust-covered pilgrim, he knew and believed that the promises made years ago, finally have come true. Salvation (which is the meaning of Jesus' name) has arrived and entered the world.

Question is: is that what we believe as well? My answer would be: no. Not really. Or, to soften the blow: we have a really hard time believing that.

And I say that because we continue to look for THE ONE who will fix the world. We're almost always hoping to find someone or something to fix things for us, to save us from the misery of the world we live, or from the misery we have created for ourselves.

Sometimes the longed-for messiah operates on the national or world stage. Perhaps Hillary or the Donald or some other political candidate who promises to make right whatever we think is wrong about our country will save us. Or maybe we look to our sports hero or team, who make us feel like we're a part of something bigger and, to boot, winners.

Sometimes the longed-for messiah lives closer to home, however – that special someone who is a candidate for a new romantic relationship so that we'll never feel lonely again. Or maybe we're hoping to be saved by the people we work with, longing for them to tell us how indispensable we are. Or perhaps we expect to be saved by our children, as they grow up to fulfill all of our dreams for them (and, truth be told, for ourselves!).

We are to a large degree like the people Luke describes, filled with expectation, wondering if various persons on the global stage or in our local circle might be the messiah. Even when they disappoint – and of course, they eventually all do – we keep looking with expectation for our personal messiah. Maybe we can't help it.

That leads me to another questions: Why don't we imagine or believe that *Jesus* is that special someone, that Messiah?

Now, I know, I know, of course we think Jesus is the Messiah. If not, why would we be in church, right? Sure. But do we expect Jesus actually to save us – not just in the eternal get-out-of-hell-free-card kind of way, but actually to save us here and now, making a tangible difference in our everyday lives? This, I think, is hard for us. And it is sad because it seems like the whole point of the incarnation was for God to get involved in our lives, personally and directly.

In Luke this point is made again as “the heaven was opened” and God spoke directly to Jesus. It's a moving and dramatic scene – Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism as the Spirit alights upon him. I think we sometimes forget the power and symbolism of the scene the Evangelists depict, as God moves from the heavenly realm to encounter Jesus – and, through Jesus, all of us – on our own terrain. God removes, that is, all that separates us from God and meets us where we are.

This is the power of Baptism – that God has opened up the heavens, descended from on high, and come to meet us where we are and *as* we are... all in order that we might know that we, too, are beloved children of God and that God is well pleased also with us. Shouldn't that make all the difference in our lives, I wonder?

Let me affirm that Jesus is our messiah, the one who identified with us, bearing the presence of God into our world tangibly, dying for the stupid things we keep doing, and defeating death through his resurrection. And if we take that seriously, two things occur.

First, we don't have to find messiahs all around us. We can support our favorite political candidate or sports team, hope for a good relationship and great colleagues, knowing that we will *not* be saved by these things. Indeed, we will regularly be disappointed by and, truth be told, disappoint these persons. But they will not save. And that's okay, because God in Jesus has done just that.

Second, once we realize that we don't need another messiah, it frees us up to make a huge difference in the world and in the lives of those around us. We, after all, are those people named by God as beloved children and chosen by God to do great things in the world.

Can you imagine, for a second, if everyone who supports a particular candidate decides to take responsibility for some aspect of the problems we hope our elected leaders will solve? Or if instead of waiting for that special someone to find us we went out looking to befriend those who are lonely or less fortunate? And what if we simply valued our colleagues or children or neighbors for who they are, not for what they can do for us? The world would, in very short order, be a remarkably different place.

On this Sunday which celebrates and remembers the baptism of our Lord, and we are encouraged to remember our own baptismal identity, may this also be a day we might remind and realize for ourselves that because Jesus came as Lord of the heavens and Son of God we don't need any other messiahs; and because Jesus came as one of us, we are also caught up in the power of the creating and redeeming God. We are, that is, those people who do not need to save the world but have been called and equipped to make a tangible difference to that little corner of the world in which we find ourselves.

When we feed a family at our community dinner, we help them last their meager income just a bit longer. It is one less dinner they have to worry about.

When I help a homeless person with a two-night stay at a motel, that person spends two less days in the cold.

When we give a person or family a food voucher, we help them having food on the table for a few days.

When we support our community farm, they will grow food for our Needham Food pantry which in turn feeds people with healthier options.

When I purchase a FairTrade item, I make a difference in at least one other person's life.

When we do individual scholarships to students in our partner village, we will have affected that student's life and their family's life for many years to come.

When I let my Muslim neighbors know that I love and respect them despite what is going on in the world, I will have made a difference in that neighbors' life.

There are many ways, you, I, we together, can make a difference in the corner of the world we live in. I don't believe that we have to save the world. Jesus did not do that. He changed one life at a time. And that is what we should and can do, but for the right reasons. Not for feeling good about ourselves but because that is what it means to be faithful Christ follower. Jesus came to show us how to live a holy life: loving our neighbors, setting the oppressed free, bringing good news to the poor, spending ourselves on behalf of the hungry and seeking justice for all. We do that not for reward but because as Christians, we are to love. It is not a choice, but our path and destiny.

Amen.