

1 Epiphany C Baptism of our Lord

Filled with Expectations

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

There is a saying the origin of which I have forgotten, but the saying is still a good one: You cannot pour water into a cup that is already full. Some of you may have heard that saying before. Sometimes it has been used as a warning to not take on too many tasks, like another way of saying your plate is already full. But I remember it being used as a way to illustrate how difficult it is to show or explain something to a person who has already made up their mind that they think or believe they already know what that something is. Their mind is already full of information, a previous experience, or, more often than not, it is the expectations a person has that can blind them to what is actually right in front of them.

Take for example the people in today's Gospel lesson. The very first words tell us the people in the Gospel were full: they were filled with expectation. The next part of that line tells us what those expectations were: they were questioning in their hearts whether or not John the Baptist was the long-awaited Messiah come to them at last. Biblical scholars have written a lot about how this concern of mistaking John the Baptist for the Messiah was addressed by all 4 Gospels, because when both John and Jesus were alive and doing their ministries, it was not very clear to the people at the time who the real Messiah was. The authors of all four Gospels attempt to explain that John the Baptist was the very last of the Old Testament prophets. Everything from the way he dressed to his actions and message is prophetic: and points to the change that is coming, the Messiah, and John is clear to point away from himself.

Yet one could argue John was a more dynamic figure than Jesus, at least at the start of the Gospel. He dressed in strange clothing, he was outspoken, calling people out for their bad behavior and demanding they repent, he even did religious stuff by baptizing people as a sign of turning away from lives that were focused on themselves only so they could focus on God.

A lot has been written about what the people of Jesus time, both Jewish people and those who were not Jewish, expected of the coming Messiah. Most often the expectation was the Messiah was going to be some military genius that would raise an army and defeat the oppressive Roman government and put the People of Israel in charge, just like in the glorious days of King David. You might say the expectation was the Messiah was going to be a great hero, a "streetwise Hercules to fight the rising odds," like it says in an old song. So, we might understand how John the Baptist could

be seen as fitting that expectation better than Jesus, which is why we have to pay close attention to how the author of Luke showed Jesus in today's Gospel because he shows us a messiah how is not a hero and instead saves us from ourselves.

First, Jesus was baptized like all the other people in today's Gospel. Although the author of Luke does not record the actual baptism, like other Gospel writers, the author does mention it. Despite all the scholarship and speculation, we don't really know why Jesus was baptized. What we can see in all the Gospels is that after Jesus was baptized there was no going back to the life he had before. For Jesus, his baptism is how he chose to start his ministry among the people who were filled with expectations about their messiah, by standing with them in the waters of baptism instead of being the one to pour the water over them. Perhaps Jesus was trying to show the people then and those of us filled with expectations now something about the waters of baptism: that baptism is as much about emptying as it is about filling. Of washing away the demands to participate in the economy of sin that says we need to care for no one, that God only helps those who help themselves, that greed is good, so get what you can when you can, that power and wealth are what will save you and how you acquire those things does not matter, that having wealth and power makes you better, smarter, and more successful than the rest of humanity so you can do whatever you want. There is no love in such an economy, and nothing of God. Yet there can be enormous pressure to participate in that economy, and no matter what anyone's expectations are, one of the gifts of baptism is that we are freed from having to be a part of a loveless economy of sin, and perhaps that might be one reason Jesus stood with those who wanted to turn from that way of living and turn toward God. Jesus is with those who want to be a part of and make such a loving change in the world.

The author of Luke also showed us after his baptism, Jesus did something before he took off to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan or called his disciples to follow him. He prayed. We'll see Jesus in prayer again in Luke's Gospel, as seeing Jesus pray is something important to Luke. And while in our more pious moments we might agree prayer is important, I am not sure we think of it as very exciting, dramatic, heroic, or even a messianic thing to do.

Perhaps one of the failings of the church is we have done a poor or inadequate job of modeling prayer, teaching about prayer, or doing much to show prayer as something other than a superficial telling God what we want, because the church has had the expectation that everyone knows what prayer is and knows how to do it. My eyes were opened to the truth that prayer is not so commonly understood shortly after I was married, and my husband found the courage to ask me how to pray. I was

shocked he asked such a question because I had heard all about how he grew up in a church that his grandfather helped start and when my husband was a teenager the minister of that church was a source of pride for the parish because that minister had written his own confirmation curriculum, which my husband had participated in. So, I had assumed he knew what prayer was, but when he saw the way I engaged with God, and the way I talked about prayer, he told me he had never heard nor seen anything like it. My response to my husband was not very academic nor dogmatic. I didn't direct him to the prayer book that lists the different types of prayer. Instead I told him prayer is one way we participate in our relationship with God; not that different from our relationships with people that require moments of sharing information or feelings or ideas and moments where we listen and receive what the other tells us or gives us. For some that might look like the Daily Office, for others it is just talking with God, some pray with color, some listen to God, and if you want to try or learn about praying like that I encourage you to come back next Sunday at 4:00 pm when we'll be doing a prayer service that will feature centering prayer.

As we also saw in today's Gospel, it was while Jesus was praying that God showed up in a wondrous way: heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Ever wonder why the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove and not a more dramatic bird associated with power like an eagle? According to historians, in Mediterranean antiquity, the dove symbolized the loving character of divine life. In other words, the dove symbolized the manifestation of God's Love. And I think it's pretty cool that as Jesus prayed, he received God's love in physical form, in a visual way anyone not blinded by expectations could also see. And then those glorious words; "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." What a powerful response to Jesus' prayer: not money or stuff, just the presence of the Holy Spirit and lots of God's love. That it seems, is all Jesus needed to face temptations, to heal, to teach and preach to tell parables, and listen, and be with those whose expectations would get in the way of seeing the Love of God in their midst. It is all Jesus needed for his ministry that would take him to the cross, the grave, and to resurrection life that is the liberating gift of God's love with us and for all of us.

2000 years later, we followers of Jesus still encounter the challenge of overcoming expectations of others and ourselves. In a book he wrote on the *Chronicles of Narnia*, former Archbishop of Canterbury and noted scholar Rowan Williams wrote about this problem: "Sharing the good news is not so much a matter of telling people what they have never heard as it is persuading them that there are things they haven't heard when they think they have." This is exactly what the staff of our new coffee shop ministry discovered when some of their friends told them they wouldn't to come into CrossRoads Café for a cup of coffee because it is in a church,

and they believe churches are always trying to convert you to their way of thinking. While working with a group of students last semester I encountered this same thing when they told me they do not associate churches with what we here at Church of the Good Shepherd hold as one of our core values of being welcoming of all people regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, gender identity, socioeconomic status, color, and things like that. These students were full of the expectation that churches are not welcoming, have ulterior motives, and can't be trusted. These are some tough expectations to deal with.

And I believe this is something we all need to be made aware of. This revelation reminds of how surprised I was to learn my husband did not know how to pray, and how my own expectations can get in the way of ministry and meeting people – even people I love - where they are instead of insisting the church or the people of the church know what our community needs and how to engage the community. This revelation might help us reframe all our ministries so that we think about them less as providing lunch for students and more about sharing lunch with whomever shows up for lunch on Wednesdays and instead of trying to make CrossRoads into what we think a coffee shop should be to being more open to stopping by CrossRoads Café to have a cup of coffee or tea to help create a place of welcome for all people. Perhaps the experience of physically emptying out the church kitchen so it can be made more effective for our growing ministries that focus on welcome around food and drink might also be an opportunity to empty ourselves of our expectations on what the kitchen has been like and become open to seeing and recognizing how our ministries might be part of the Love of God manifesting in our midst.

It's big stuff, I know. Maybe exciting stuff. Maybe different from what you expected to hear today. That's okay. It seems even in our Gospel we can see that is part of it looks like to follow Jesus and might be why the author of Luke emphasized Jesus in prayer on the other side of people filled with expectations. Maybe Jesus was showing us when we let go of our expectations, we are open to being filled with God's Love.

In just a minute, we will all have the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows. This is something we do every time the Church commemorates the Baptism of Jesus. Renewing the promise of baptism is not just about mouthing words, it's an opportunity to engage in an activity that is deeper than stating what we believe or feel we are supposed to believe. When we renew our baptismal vows, we are engaging in something similar to what happened at the Jordon River when Jesus was baptized: re-committing to doing something about those beliefs through our ministries. If we want to, we can even check ourselves and think about what is our expectations when it

comes to those promises, like what it means to continue resist evil and to repent, what it means to continue in the Apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayers and so forth, and what ways we might let go of our expectations and be more open as individuals and as a parish to see the Holy in our midst.

It is also an opportunity to reflect on the ways we see God's Love manifest among us and to be reminded that despite all our expectations, or expectations that make ministry so challenging, we already have everything we need to meet those challenges: we have the Love of God with us, in Holy Communion, and in ways that go beyond expectations.