

Misguided Expectations  
December 8, 2013  
Matthew 3:1-12

Our Scripture reading is the story of John the Baptist preaching a message that was something different than what many expected. It is found in the third chapter of Matthew, beginning with the first verse.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do not presume 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. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Ever-Present Divine, during this season of waiting help us to acknowledge our expectations and to discern if any are misguided. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I begin with a question that has likely never been asked in this sanctuary before during a service or worship. It isn't the kind of rhetorical question I typically include in my preaching. It will likely surprise you and may even disturb you. Nevertheless I must ask it: has anyone ever tried to scare the hell out of you?

During my years in Dallas there was an annual event focused on just such a goal. Of course, the organizers marketed it a bit differently. Named "Hell House," the event started in 1991 as a ministry of Trinity Church – an Assemblies of God congregation – just outside of Dallas. It became so successful that other hell houses are now commonplace around the country each Halloween.<sup>1</sup>

Each year over 10,000 people make their way through the original Hell House. The experience is intended for those age 13 and up since the scenes contain "guns, blood, violence . . . and disturbing images."<sup>2</sup>

This so-called "creative alternative to the traditional haunted house" is "nearly impossible to adequately describe . . . to those who have never attended. Groups progress through a number of scenes – each more disturbing than the last – on their way to a final scene that ends with the opportunity to commit to Christ in order to be saved from hell."<sup>3</sup>

This is fear based evangelism at its best or worst – depending on your perspective. Rather than inviting the audience of primarily teenaged participants to rationally explore the possibility of converting to Christianity, it seeks to scare them into reciting a rote prayer so that they can be officially counted as being among the saved.

Many who attend go because of the hype, and trust that the organizers will make each year more over the top than the last. They go with many and varied expectations, but almost all go expecting to be shocked.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hell House: About" <<http://darkrailhellhouse.com/about/>>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Smith. "Halloween at Hell House." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2011/10/27/halloween-at-the-hell-house/>>

What about us? How do we approach this morning's Scripture reading? Haven't we learned to beware of the forerunner of Jesus? Isn't John the Baptist a tad too something for us? Perhaps you have skipped over his story as just another preface to the real story. Or maybe you tend to ignore him as too eccentric, too strangely dressed, or too harsh.

Clearly he is a preacher of some renown. People make the effort to travel out into the wilderness to hear him preach.

Imagine the reaction of the religious folks in his audience when he directs his sermon at them. Instead of affirming them, he calls them out. He demands action. Nothing short of repentance will do. Rather than start with affirmation, he calls them by a hurtful name.

What is he asking? It seems to me he is asking the religious folks to do two things: repent and get ready for the one who is to come.

As I look around this morning, I don't see anyone who would claim to have been a Pharisee or a Sadducee earlier in life. I do, however, see those who would readily share that part of their story was nurtured in a Presbyterian or Episcopalian or Methodist or Congregational church. No matter where you have been, as a person of faith these words are directed at you just as much as they are directed at me.

Let's start with the R word. Yes, that R word: repent.

John demands repentance as a starting point for religious folks. That same standard still applies today. Repentance is about owning up to our shortcomings. It starts with acknowledging our wrongdoings, but pushes us to move beyond them by returning to God and being directed anew by God's wisdom.

Maybe you think that since our worship bulletin doesn't contain a confession of sin or an assurance of pardon, you can worship here without repenting. Think again. Now is the time for repentance.

Rabbi Eliezer taught his disciples "Repent one day before your death." One of them then asked, "How will we know when that day is?" to which he replied, "All the more reason to repent today."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg. *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Baker, 2004), p.191. Cited by Alyce M. McKenzie in "Advice How Not to Prepare." <<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Advice-How-Not-Prepare-Alyce-McKenzie-12-03-2013.html>>

So, this morning we all are here to repent. We recognize that repentance is more than a change of mind; it is a change of heart.

David Henson conveys this truth powerfully. He writes:

Repentance restores the relationship, not by bridging the gap over sin but by removing our blinders so we may see God with us, in us, before us, calling us further into the desert, into the wilderness, into the work of bringing God's Reign to earth as it is in heaven.<sup>5</sup>

John the Baptist would say we have not really listened if we stop at repentance. We must continue on our Advent journey by actively and intentionally preparing for the coming of Jesus.

We must be honest about our expectations. We must measure them against what is being preached by John the Baptist. We must see them in the light of our Advent wreath.

We are watching and waiting, but what do we expect? Does your mind tend to race ahead to the birth? If so, can you almost see the cast of characters that will be present?

Maybe our memories are incomplete. Maybe the children's Christmas pageants miss part of the story. Eve Bunting's children's book, *We Were There: A Nativity Story*, tells the story of some lesser known creatures that made their way to Jesus' birth.

Her beautifully illustrated tale offers accounts of a snake, a toad, a scorpion, a cockroach, a bat, a spider, and even a rat. Each gives a first person account, ending with the words "I will be there."<sup>6</sup>

Only when the reader reaches the end of the book is she able to see these usually unimagined creatures joining the ones we have been taught to expect to see at the nativity.

This morning, I wonder about you. This year, when the appointed time arrives, will you be there?

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> David R. Henson. "On Our Behalf: Reclaiming Repentance as a Progressive Christian."  
<<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/02/on-our-behalf-reclaiming-repentance-as-a-progressive-christian/>>

<sup>6</sup> Eve Bunting. *We Were There: A Nativity Story*, 2001.