

Luke 3:15-22
January 10. '10

"FILLED WITH EXPECTATION"

(Before scripture)

BEFORE READING OUR SCRIPTURE THIS MORNING, I THINK A BIT OF BACKGROUND MAY PROVE HELPFUL.

FIRST OF ALL, I WANT YOU TO RECALL WHERE WE'VE BEEN IN THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS.

YOU MAY REMEMBER THAT, IN FOLLOWING THE LECTIONARY READINGS IN LUKE, ON THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, JESUS WAS ALREADY 12 YEARS OLD.

WE WERE STILL IN THE SECOND CHAPTER OF LUKE, THOUGH – THE SAME CHAPTER THAT GIVES US THE WONDROUS ACCOUNT OF THE NATIVITY.

LAST WEEK WE STEPPED BRIEFLY INTO MATTHEW'S GOSPEL FOR THE ACCOUNT OF THE STORY OF THE WISE MEN.

TODAY, WE'RE BACK IN LUKE & BACK WITH THE LECTIONARY READING FOR TODAY.

WE'VE JUST ENTERED THE THIRD CHAPTER, BUT OUR READING FOR TODAY SKIPS THE FIRST 14 VERSES & ALSO OMITTS VERSES 18, 19 & 20.

IT SEEMS LIKE A RATHER ODD CHOICE OF VERSES BUT WITH THIS BEING THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD SUNDAY, THE VERSES HAVE BEEN NARROWED DOWN TO THOSE THAT PERTAIN SPECIFICALLY TO THAT EVENT.

I DON'T THINK IT'S POSSIBLE, THOUGH, TO REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE WITHOUT THE PREVIOUS VERSES AS WELL AS THE OMITTED ONES.

WE'LL READ ALL OF THE VERSES IN THIS SECTION & THEN GO BACK & TAKE A LOOK AT THE ONES WHICH PRECEDE THEM.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING IS LUKE 3:15-22.

(After scripture)

THIS IS AN INTRIGUING EVENT, ISN'T IT?

AND JOHN THE BAPTIST IS SURELY ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING FIGURES IN THE BIBLE, IF NOT IN ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY.

WE DRAW A MENTAL IMAGE OF WHAT IS TAKING PLACE HERE.

A WRITER NAMED JODY SEYMOUR HAS GIVEN US A VERY VIVID PICTURE OF THIS EVENT.

LISTEN - AND IMAGINE YOURSELF BEING THERE.

GNATS FLEW PATTERNS AROUND HIS MATTED BEARD.

THE DESERT LEFT TRAILS OF SALT WHICH DISAPPEARED INTO HIS HAIRY FACE.

HE WAS TIRED, BUT 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 CONVINCING 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 REFLECTING FROM THE BEADS OF SWEAT ON THE MAN'S FACE AND RECOGNIZED HIM.

"I NEED TO BE BAPTIZED BY YOU, AND DO YOU COME TO ME?", HE MANAGED TO SPEAK.

IN THE BACKGROUND THERE WAS THUNDER, AND A WHITE DOVE DIPPED DOWN NEAR THEM IN ITS SWEEPING FLIGHT.

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!

JOHN SPLASHED WATER ONTO HIS OWN FACE AS ONE WHO HAD FINISHED A LONG JOURNEY.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY MONTHS HE FELT HIS THIRST SATISFIED.

NOW, WE DON'T KNOW HOW JOHN FELT.

BUT WE DO KNOW THAT THERE IS SOMETHING MORE TO OUR FAITH IN JESUS – SOMETHING MORE TO OUR DISCIPLESHIP – SOMETHING MORE TO OUR BELIEVING IN THE PROMISES & CHALLENGES OF GOD.

WE KNOW THERE'S SOMETHING THAT COMES FROM BEYOND US - AND TOUCHES US NOW AND AGAIN - AND SATISFIES OUR THIRST.

WE KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO BE "FILLED WITH EXPECTATION."

YOU SEE, THAT'S WHAT LUKE TELLS US IN THE OPENING VERSE OF THE PASSAGE WE JUST READ.

"AS THE PEOPLE WERE FILLED WITH EXPECTATION..."

WHAT WAS IT THAT BROUGHT ABOUT THAT EXPECTATION?

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT JOHN THAT HAD STIRRED THEIR HEARTS & FILLED THEIR MINDS WITH A GLORIOUS HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

HAD HE PROMISED THEM FREEDOM FROM ROMAN OPPRESSION?

HAD HE TOLD THEM THEIR LIVES WERE GOING TO BECOME EASIER?

WAS THERE SOME MAGNIFICENT FUTURE AWAITING THEM JUST BEYOND THE HORIZON?

LET'S SEE.

LET'S SEE WHAT JOHN HAD SAID THAT CAUSED THESE PEOPLE TO FOLLOW HIM OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS "FILLED WITH EXPECTATION."

LOOK AT THE VERSES WHICH IMMEDIATELY PRECEDE THE ONES WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

“JOHN SAID TO THE CROWDS THAT CAME OUT TO BE BAPTIZED BY HIM....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.”

AND 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.’

AND THEN OUR PASSAGE BEGINS – “AS THE PEOPLE WERE FILLED WITH EXPECTATION...”

IN THE FACE OF SOME UN-MINCED WORDS & VERY POWERFUL CHALLENGES, THE PEOPLE WHO FOLLOWED JOHN WERE “FILLED WITH EXPECTATION!”

THEY WEREN’T RUNNING & SCREAMING FROM THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN BACK TO JERUSALEM.

THEY WEREN’T ROUNDING UP A DELEGATION TO SUGGEST THAT JOHN TONE IT DOWN A BIT.

THEY WEREN’T WANDERING OFF IN SEARCH OF A LESS-CHALLENGING PROPHET.

THEY WERE “FILLED WITH EXPECTATION.”

THERE’S A COMIC STRIP THAT SHOWS A SKEPTIC SHOUTING UP TO THE HEAVENS: “GOD! IF YOU’RE UP THERE, WHAT SHOULD WE DO?”

A VOICE CALLS OUT: “FEED THE HUNGRY, HOUSE THE HOMELESS, ESTABLISH JUSTICE.”

THE SKEPTIC LOOKS ALARMED: “JUST TESTING,” HE SAYS.

AND THE VOICE REPLIES: “ME TOO.”

THERE IS SOMETHING IN JOHN’S WORDS THAT STRUCK A CORD WITH THOSE PEOPLE OUT IN THE WILDERNESS.

THEY WANTED TO BE CHALLENGED.

DEEP DOWN INSIDE, THEY WEREN’T SATISFIED LIVING FOR THEMSELVES.

AND NEITHER ARE WE.

IF TRUTH BE TOLD, DON’T YOU REALLY DESIRE A LITTLE TOUGH LOVE FROM GOD?

YOU WANT A CHALLENGE.

YOU WANT SOMETHING TO SMACK YOU OUT OF YOUR LETHARGY, YOUR COMPLACENCY, YOUR MUNDANE, HUM-DRUM, DAY-TO-DAY DRUDGERY.

LIKE THOSE FIRST BELIEVERS STANDING ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN RIVER, YOU WANT SOMETHING MORE.

YOU WANT YOUR LIFE TO MATTER FOR SOMETHING. YOU, TOO, ARE FILLED WITH EXPECTATION.

NOW HERE’S WHERE THIS STORY GETS REALLY INTERESTING.

THE EXPECTATION THE PEOPLE FELT IN WONDERING IF JOHN WAS THE MESSIAH WAS ABOUT TO BE EXCEEDED.

THE REALITY WOULD EXCEED THE EXPECTATION!

THE VERSES THAT ARE OMITTED FROM THE LECTIONARY READING ARE VERSES THAT PERTAIN TO HEROD & HIS CONFLICT WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST.

NOW *THIS* HEROD ISN'T THE SAME HEROD THAT WE READ ABOUT LAST WEEK IN THE STORY OF THE WISE MEN.

HE WAS EVERY BIT AS EVIL & AS CRAZY, THOUGH, AS THIS PASSAGE SUGGESTS.

JOHN HAD A PROBLEM WITH HEROD ANTIPAS & WE DON'T NEED TO GO INTO DETAIL ABOUT IT BECAUSE THE FACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES REGARDING JOHN'S DISPLEASURE WITH THE KING.

YOU SEE, HEROD HAD MARRIED HERODIAS, WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE HIS SISTER-IN-LAW AS WELL AS HIS NIECE!

ENOUGH SAID, I TRUST.

NOW WHEN JOHN SPEAKS OUT AGAINST HIM, HEROD HAS HIM – AS LUKE SAYS – “SHUT UP” IN PRISON.

THAT PHRASING IS INTERESTING.

HEROD HAS JOHN LITERALLY “SHUT UP” AND HE TRIES TO HAVE HIS WORDS “SHUT UP” AS WELL.

IN THE VERY NEXT VERSE, THOUGH, WE READ THAT WHEN JESUS WAS BAPTIZED, THE HEAVEN “WAS OPENED.”

“SHUTTING UP” & “OPENING UP.”

HEROD SHUTS UP HOPE.

JESUS OPENS UP HOPE.

HEROD SHUTS UP THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW WAY OF LIVING.

JESUS OPENS UP THAT CHALLENGE.

HEROD SHUTS UP A CALL TO COMPASSION, LOVE & SERVICE.

JESUS OPENS UP THAT CALL.

THAT'S WHY WE'RE FILLED WITH EXPECTATION, ISN'T IT?

WE'RE FILLED WITH THE EXPECTATION OF HOPE.

WE'RE FILLED WITH THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW WAY OF LIFE.

WE'RE FILLED WITH THE CALL TO COMPASSION, THE CALL TO LOVE & THE CALL TO SERVE.

IT'S AN EXCITING – YET ALSO FRIGHTENING – PROSPECT.

BUT KNOWING THAT JESUS WALKS BESIDE US CAN ALLEVIATE THE FEAR & ACCENTUATE THE EXCITEMENT.

A MINISTER WHO SERVED A CHURCH IN A VERY DANGEROUS AREA OF THE CITY WAS ALWAYS AMAZED BY AN ELDERLY WOMAN WHO WAS ONE OF HIS MEMBERS.

SHE SEEMED TO HAVE NO FEAR ABOUT COMING TO MEETINGS & SERVICES AT THE CHURCH AT NIGHT.

SHE DIDN'T HAVE A CAR & WOULD HAVE TO WALK HOME THROUGH THE DARK & FRIGHTENING STREETS.

ONE NIGHT, AFTER A PRAYER SERVICE AT WHICH THIS WOMAN HAD BEEN PRESENT, THE MINISTER WAS LOCKING UP THE CHURCH.

HE HAPPENED TO SEE THE WOMAN WALKING FROM THE CHURCH DOWN THE STREET TOWARD HER APARTMENT.

AS SHE WALKED, SHE WAS HOLDING HER HAND OUT, AS IF SOME UNSEEN COMPANION WERE WALKING WITH HER & HOLDING HER HAND, AND AS SHE WALKED, SHE WAS HUMMING A FAMILIAR SPIRITUAL.

“PRECIOUS LORD, TAKE MY HAND,

LEAD ME ON, LET ME STAND.

I’M TIRED, I’M WEAK, I’M ALONE.

THROUGH THE STORM, THROUGH THE NIGHT,

LEAD ME ON TO THE LIGHT,

TAKE MY HAND, PRECIOUS LORD, LEAD ME HOME.”

WHEN THE HERODS OF THIS WORLD WOULD SEEK

TO SHUT US UP & SHUT UP THE HOPE WITHIN US, JESUS

WALKS AT OUR SIDE.

WHEN THE WORLD TRIES TO STIFLE THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW WAY OF LIFE, JESUS IS THERE WITH US TO LEAD US ON.

WHEN THE FEARS OF EVERYDAY LIVING THREATEN TO OVERWHELM US, JESUS STANDS IN OUR MIDST, BECKONING US TO JOIN HIM IN A LIFE THAT HAS BEEN OPENED UP TO THE CALL TO COMPASSION, THE CALL TO LOVE & THE CALL TO SERVICE.

IT’S A CALL THE FILLS US WITH EXPECTATION. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*