

Expectation

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Baptism of Jesus - January 9, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Parts of this service are adapted from Epiphany resources by Rev. Emily Meyer, Executive Director, The Ministry Lab, St Paul, MN [UCC, UMC, & PC(USA)]

Hey, it's cold - but what do we expect? It's winter in Minnesota! Some expectations don't disappoint us utterly - yet. With the world covered in snow and blasted by icy winds, today hardly seems the right time to be talking about plunging into a river, but today is the day we recall the Baptism of Jesus. So let's welcome the warmth of the Spirit among us, making us one despite distance. Let's invite the Spirit to melt what is harsh and frozen and unyielding in ourselves, and flow with the grace of God that surrounds and fills us, with resilience, with potential.



A woman bathes in an ice hole in a pond in St. Petersburg, Russia, on January 4, 2022. I personally have never understood the appeal of the polar plunge.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2022/01/photos-of-the-week-new-year-mammoth-mountain-sea-scream/>

RESPONSIVE READING Based on Isaiah 43

Our God, our Source of Life, calls to you, and declares:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned.

Bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name.

To you, I say, “Come!”

All of you from the North country -

from Mississippi watersheds and vast rolling plains -

from Southwestern farmlands and Eastern ridges -

from the Great Lakes and Iron Range -

I will bring you again in one great gathering,

I will hold you, from the least to the greatest,

I have called you by name, you are mine.

We claim the joy of water as it sustains and nourishes us.

Let it flow and pour and sparkle for all people.

that each may know the daily gift of God in water.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people who came to John for baptism had great expectations of a savior to come; but what were God's expectations for Jesus, who as yet has done little to warrant praise? What are God's expectations of us?

People were filled with expectation; everyone was wondering about whether John might be the Messiah. John answered them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie their sandal straps. This One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. With winnowing fork in hand, this One is ready to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary; but the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the sky was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, declaring, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Expectations. Are they helpful or harmful? I've heard it said that an expectation is a premeditated resentment. Failed expectations can be cause for discouragement or, worse, for anger. Today's Gospel speaks of expectation filling the people who had come to hear John the Baptist, and to be baptized by him. They came in search of a new life; they came in search of a new leader, but they were looking at the wrong leader, the wrong fix for their woes. They looked at John and asked, Could he be the one to throw off the oppressive yoke of Rome? John quickly poked a hole in that idea: don't look at me; one much greater is coming and is already here.

Jesus was baptized along with the crowd that day; one of all those who took the plunge. But only on Jesus did the dove descend; only to him did the voice from heaven declare, "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." What had Jesus done to please God? According to Luke, nothing, except to give his parents a big scare when he was just 12 and stayed behind in the temple at Jerusalem to talk with the teachers. Then, they were just kind of mad at him. Maybe even a little disappointed.

Parents bring their children for baptism, not to show off their accomplishments but because they are helpless - but full of potential. The onus is on the parents to raise them right - or not. Parents' hearts may be full of expectations that may never be fulfilled. In fact, I think it's human nature for children to disappoint their parents and parents to disappoint their children sometimes. We

disappoint ourselves when we fail to live up to our own expectations: another day, another year, has ended, and we're no closer either to peace in the world or personal fulfillment.

Unfulfilled expectations seem to be the order of the day: 2021 opened with the hope that by the time we reached 2022, the pandemic would be behind us. Instead, we find ourselves facing a new surge. Vaccination, we once hoped, would end our isolation and restrictions. Instead, it's become a political hot button - witness this week's controversy over an unvaccinated tennis star in Australia. Or, much closer to home, think of people right here whose employment has been terminated over the issue. There are bound to be hard feelings all around.

What do we really expect? And are our expectations realistic? The people of Jesus' time were expecting the wrong leader for the wrong job; instead they got a promise of baptism by fire, and the burning away of what was really not essential to their spiritual life and health. Could it be that the coronavirus is doing the same for us: burning away excess, showing us the truth about our lives, including our failures as a society, reminding us of what is really essential?

Could it be that we have forgotten what the point of our being is, that we were made by love, in love, and for love: to be loved and to love? That our value is not based on what we have done, or even what we hope and plan to accomplish, but on our connection to God and one another? From pastor/poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes: 'You are a newborn child, fresh from God's birth waters. Your choices, though real, are immaterial to God's adoration. You can never be good enough, for there is no such thing. It is God's goodness, not yours, that guarantees your belovedness. Of course you are not deserving. You may protest, "But, God, I'm not all that good." God will reply, "Oh, child, you're so much worse than you know. But I love you. You are my child, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'¹

No words in the Bible or anywhere else say this more clearly than Isaiah 43: God says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;.... When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.... I will bring you back from all the distant places of your exile."

These are words to take to heart; to cherish and cling to in the worst of times, when every other comfort fails. They are words meant for you, and yet not for you alone: the prophet Isaiah spoke for God, not to a forlorn individual but to a struggling, doubting people in a conflicted world. Sound familiar? That nation was all too aware of their own shortcomings; they had not lived up to their early promise; they had betrayed their own ideals and harvested the bitter fruit of failed expectations; they had nearly lost their identity as a people called by God. God returned them to

¹ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, January 7, 2022.

their homeland and to their center in God's self, saying, "I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you."

The Bible teaches a different kind of expectation: a hope that doesn't depend on outward circumstances for its confidence, nor on personal achievement, but on faith. We get to be part of the goodness God calls us to; and our work is not in vain. It's not up to us to complete the work, but neither can we ignore it. We hold hope for one another..And "hope is not naïve optimism; [for] *it is only people who have hope who truly recognize that suffering and violence are not part of how the world ought to be.*"² How the world ought to be, so much more peaceful, but is not yet. And still the world, and you, and we together, are beloved by God.

Faith and hope are group efforts; we arrive together at our longed-for goal, a community of all-undeserving people made precious by God's love:

Faith cannot do too much expecting; God's holy words will all come true...
Since Love desires and plans to save us, how can omnipotence refuse?...
We'll make it through the journey's dangers, we'll make it by God's helping hand
You'd never know we once were strangers, to see us in God's heavenly land.³

Faith cannot do too much expecting. Think about it! Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers:

God, may your people be filled with expectation of your presence near us; and may we hear your word of promise that makes us your beloved people.

Let us not be overwhelmed with despair, but attuned to the cries of your children: those suffering from covid and those caring for those sufferers, and for all who are ill;

Let us be attuned to the cries of our school children, distressed and deprived of normal learning, many struggling with mental illness in this time of uncertainty; and to the needs of teachers and other school employees;

Let us be attuned to the needs of the hungry, the homeless, and the underhoused, in these brutal days of winter;

Let us above all be attuned to your voice, calling each your children:

We pray for all who mourn. May they be comforted, may the broken be mended, and may we move into your tomorrow with willing and uplifted hearts. In Jesus' name, who taught us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven...

² Russell Johnson, "The Revolutionary Joy of Desmond Tutu," *Sightings*, January 6, 2022.

³ Adapted from Stanley Wiersma, *Adjoining Fields*, "Faith Cannot Do Too Much Expecting."