

Baptism of the Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Jan. 10, 2016
“filled with expectation”

With today’s Gospel reading, we abruptly jump from the contemplation of the birth of Christ into the adult baptism of Jesus. The birth was an inauspicious beginning, fraught with danger and conspiracy, the determination of King Herod to kill any possible rival to his own kingship, the flight of the holy family to shelter in Egypt, and— let us not forget – the public witness of the shepherds and the Magi to the birth of the holy child. Jesus now emerges as a thirty year old adult filled with passion and energy, seeking baptism from his cousin John.

Why? John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, rooted in the long standing Jewish practices connecting washing and ethical behavior. Why would Jesus seek– or need– baptism himself? The Scripture suggests Jesus got in line with everyone else, he sought no special treatment. Luke’s Gospel account leaves open the question of *why* Jesus might have sought baptism. Instead, Luke describes what happens after the baptism, when Jesus is praying, the holy spirit descends and God speaks to Jesus.

So, why? Well, there are multiple theological possibilities, such as, Jesus was ‘born into the larger nexus of tragedy and sin and entered into the full implication of the incarnation’ – in other words, was fully human and therefore shared our sinful nature. Or, that all people are created and redeemed from the same gracious essence of God. Or, that Jesus’ desire to be baptized by John was an expression of solidarity, to show that he identified with the broken people of the world, just as later in his ministry he identified with the poor, the sick, the outcasts. You can contemplate the theological implications as you will. There is no ‘right’ answer to this ‘why’ question.

I offer another possibility, actually more of a practical observation. Here were two charismatic prophets of God – cousins in fact – who could easily be seen as rivals, and indeed probably were viewed as rivals by their followers. There is some evidence in the Gospels of this rivalry – like, for example, the Catholic and the Protestant churches might be rivals today. These two prophets come together for a summit – John telling the people, ‘one comes after me whose sandals I am not worthy to tie,’ and Jesus presenting himself simply as part of the crowd seeking John’s baptism of water. They greet each other by publicly showing mutual respect and admiration, and with humility. To me, this adds special meaning to God’s words to Jesus *after* Jesus has received John’s blessing – *you are my son, with whom I am well pleased*. Jesus’ humility and holiness are pleasing to God.

I can’t help wondering what it might be like if our politicians and our religious leaders presented

themselves with humility, and admiration for each other – instead of conceit and bravado,

nipping criticisms, and broad attacks on each other's credibility and leadership. *We* would be well pleased. And better able to tackle the serious business of choosing a leader whom we would follow not merely tolerate for the next four years. Perhaps that's the point. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, better decisions can be made.

One phrase leaps out at me from today's Gospel: *The people were filled with expectation.*

What were the people looking for who came to hear John, who listened to Jesus? Think what Jesus addressed in his ministry: ways to move through loneliness and hopelessness; fears about death and anxieties about life; inclusion rather than exclusion; restoration of ethical and moral behaviors consistent with being the children of Abraham. The people who followed John and Jesus hoped that someone would lead them out of their current difficulties. [Much as we, in this election year cycle, look for leaders whom we can trust and support.]

The people were filled with expectation. Today we stand together as community and renew our baptismal vows. What are the expectations in our baptism? That God knows each of us by name, that we commit ourselves to God in Christ, to serve Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of every human being, and we do so as a community in which all of us make this *same* commitment of how we will treat each other, with God's help. There are other expectations, of course – from the opening prayer, that our hearts are open to God and from God no secrets are hid; that when we confess, God forgives us our sins. We are filled with expectation of how our relationship with God functions in our lives.

The people were filled with expectation. That, it seems to me, describes every person whom I have heard declare, 'I am really not religious' – and I do hear some version of this often. I am sure you do, too. I took a quick look at demographic data on the internet – approximately 22% of the Anacortes population claims to attend church, and/but? some 60 percent do not actually claim a religious tradition. If I am doing the math with reasonable accuracy, only about 13 percent of the population actually claim a religious affiliation *and* attend church regularly. Even that seems an overstatement – that would be more than 2,000 folks attending church in Anacortes on a given Sunday. Maybe. The bottom line is, we live amongst a population of 'NONE's', most of whom describe themselves as 'nothing in particular.'

When I ask these folks what that means – 'not really religious' – they usually indicate a sense of a higher power or being, a 'belief' if you will, but they seem to have no sense of what a relationship with this higher power might be, how that might relate to or be a part of their lives, or how a relationship with God binds us into community. They don't know what they believe about God. '*The people were filled with expectation*' seems an honest and authentic description of the many who claim they are 'not really religious,' but are seeking.

How do we engage the expectations of the 'not really religious'? We probably find it most comfortable to cloak ourselves in religiosity, quote some Scripture, and invite them to church.

That's ok, but I'm not sure that accomplishes much.

In a recent article written for Christian Century, Teri McDowell Ott wrote, "the belief that churches have what seekers need gets in the way of a real exchange." Christian Century, January 6, 2016. I agree with her. There is hubris, not humility, in asserting "our church" is the answer when we don't know what their expectations are.

What is *their expectation*? I can only offer my own experience – my approach is to help them look at *their* unexamined faith. Who or what is this higher power they acknowledge? What questions do they have? Are they curious, or afraid? Don't they have all of those questions the people listening to John and Jesus had – ways to get through loneliness, hopelessness, fears about death and anxiety about life? Where is their understanding (or lack thereof) hitting a wall, a place they can't go beyond?

I am persuaded that projecting certainty of belief and lack of vulnerability erects walls, barriers, for people 'filled with expectation' – whereas acknowledging the validity of questions and uncertainty is affirming. I don't know what their expectation about a relationship with God is, and I won't pretend that I do.

I believe we should approach interfaith dialogue the same way. We don't really know what someone else believes, however well-read we are about their faith tradition – we might be able to recite a passage or tenet from the Koran, for example. But we learn what our Muslim neighbors believe only if we listen to their hopes and questions, their expectations of relationship with God.

One of our baptismal promises is to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to witness. Our role as baptized witnesses is to help others bend towards God for strength. Bend towards God for strength. There is an expression, "Jesus holds the shovel, and the Spirit does the work". Bend towards God, and Jesus and the Holy Spirit will carry them from there.

Over the holidays, one of my grandchildren (nine years old), who's being raised as a 'nothing in particular' – her mother is Christian, father Jewish – asked me what I did as a priest. That's hard to explain to a nine year old, with no background in church. And then she asked, '*Granny, is it ok not to believe in God?*' I recognized her question immediately as *loaded* – was this about her? Or, her and me? Or about her friends who are entering with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance into instruction for confirmation or bat mitzpha? Was this about her parents? What were the expectations behind this nine year old's question?

A lot of answers flashed through my head, and they all began with her name. *Grace*, I said, *I think God can handle rejection without anger. God loves us.* Grace sat silently with that thought sitting next to her on the couch – in the silence I considered other things I could say – but it seemed that what I had said was enough. After a few minutes, Grace nodded wisely, smiled and hugged me. And I told her how much I love her.

In Christ, we are all the Beloved.

Amen.

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