

## *Expectation, Hope, Moral Reform, a Second Chance?*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
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*Preached on the Third Sunday of Advent, (13Dec), 2009.*

Text: Luke 3:7 “...the multitudes came out to be baptized by John.”

What brought them out in such numbers to listen to John the Baptist? Just what did the multitudes seek in his teaching and baptism? Luke tells us, “So, with many other exhortations [John] preached *good news* to the people.”<sup>1</sup> This follows his first exhortation to the crowd, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”<sup>2</sup> One has a hard time putting these two statements together. It must have not been good news they came for, at least not good news as we define it. What drew them to this man? He was the son of a Temple priest. He had lived for several years in the Judean wilderness between Jerusalem and Jericho, as god-forsaken a place as you might ever imagine. He ate locusts and wild honey. Even my children in their teenaged vegetarian phases never stooped to that. He had an untamed look in his eyes. What transpired behind that wild stare? And to hear him? He had no filters for tact or caution. He said what needed to be said but perhaps what should not have been said. Yet, Luke tells us, “...the *multitudes* came out to be baptized by John” and “...the *multitudes* asked him....”<sup>3</sup> Whole crowds left Jerusalem and Jericho to hear and see his spectacle, enthralled by the violence of his rhetoric.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Bear fruits that befit repentance! ... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!<sup>4</sup>

In the first verses of Luke’s third chapter John is implicitly contrasted with the political and religious elites of his age: Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas. My friend CDR Travis Moger is here with us this morning. Yesterday morning at breakfast we discussed the reading and particularly this character John. Perhaps he took a few liberties with the story but Travis said, “These multitudes who flocked to John were people who did not typically go in for John’s style. I imagine they worked in the Jerusalem markets, doing trades all day, not completely unlike the people in your church do in New York. Had they gone to church, they would perhaps have more likely been found in suburban pews listening to a well educated parson with a doctorate in divinity and even the title like *Admiral*(!) Here they were leaving the confines of civility, rushing down to the Jordan to hear a wild-eyed preacher as if they were going to a tent meeting.”

What drew them to him? What draws us to him? All have expectations and a vague hope about something was missing in their lives. Others have interest in moral reform— by then

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:18.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:7b.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:7, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:8-9.

their nation like ours had stooped to new lows. Still others must have just sought second chances. People in the crowds asked John questions, ‘*what shall we do?*’<sup>5</sup> Soldiers asked and interestingly he did not tell them to resign their commissions. Tax collectors, that most hated of governmental bureaucrat, asked and interestingly he did not tell them to quit their jobs and do something productive. The rich were there because he spoke to many who had large wardrobes and plenty of food. He did not tell them to give it all away. How did he answer their questions? Share with those less fortunate, do your duty, do not pad your expense accounts, be content with what you have and what you earn. Reading between the lines he must have told them to follow the Torah, because his whole mission seems to have been the restoration of Judaism.<sup>6</sup> He wanted them to walk again in the old ways of purity and justice. He sensed something (or Someone) was about to happen to Judaism. “We don’t have time to dawdle!” John said. “Clean up your sorry acts and live right.”

I told you last week that today we need John and his message. Things are still not right. Perhaps we *are* the same type of folks who flocked out to hear him. What are our expectations? What are our hopes? Is it just clean up the world and reform things? Is it for a second chance that we seek forgiveness and a new start? *Yes*. We know that things are out of kilter. The only difference is most of us do not have the chutzpah that this prophet had. We are not willing to run afoul of the elites who lead us like lemmings off the cliff. John was so determined and tactless he lost his head to King Herod after telling the truth about immorality in the court and in the king’s bed chamber.<sup>7</sup> Few of us would speak the truth to power like that. We casually look the other way. We only gossip about such stories and pass the details to friends on the internet. ‘*Looking the other way*’ is our modern solution to all this. But saying that, we are still fascinated when someone arises on the scene and calls things the way they are.

I remember years ago when I was younger—in my middle twenties—and had less tact than I do today. I once preached a sermon about immorality, a specific comment about a specific issue in our town. I was so incensed about the injustice of it, I sputtered in the pulpit. After the sermon that week, most of my members seemed scandalized that I had been so direct and had meddled in places they would rather I politely ignore. I endured a lot of heat for what I had said, especially after it appeared in the local paper in black and white with a picture of me looking all righteously indignant. We like preachers to know the truth, but we don’t always want them to speak about it out loud in public. One of the dearest members of the church happened to have been in the hospital and missed the sermon. I went to see her that week. I brought it up in the visit, figuring she had not heard about the flap over my sermon. But I underestimated the power of gossip. She had already heard all about it. I asked her for her advice. Should I keep quiet and let things go. “No, David, if you don’t remind us of the truth and the better way, who will?”

We live in a time of vague unease. We know things are not right but most of us in churches like ours are too polite to talk about the real problems. We just keep praying and hope

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 3:10, 12, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly theirs is the same question asked of Peter at Pentecost, ‘*What shall we do?*’ In Acts 2:37-38, however, Peter told them, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” John did not tell them to have faith in Jesus. After all, Jesus had not yet begun to preach and gather disciples, so John only pointed them to him, the one coming after him.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 14:3ff.

for the best. Where is John these days? Very rarely in pulpits like this. You have to leave this neighborhood. You have to go where the preachers glare out from behind a Bible and communicate with a directness that both repels and draws us. We all have expectations and hopes for a better world. Many of us—just this week—have done or said things for which we would love to have a chance of forgiveness and a second chance. During this morning's silent confession we could not even bring ourselves to mention it to God. As if God doesn't know! What should we do?

And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise....Collect no more than is appointed you....Rob no one by violence and false accusation and be content with your wages."<sup>8</sup>

There was more John told them. He stated that there was one coming after him who was mightier than he. That One who followed John still has the power of forgiveness. He is the key to grace. He can fill your lives with God's Spirit. He is the offerer of second chances. If you give yourself over to him, even though others take wrong paths and tempt you to take them, too, something will have changed inside you. You will know the way, the life and the truth.<sup>9</sup> No wonder he draws us still, and it is good news.

End

Expectations Advent 3.DOC

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:10-14.

<sup>9</sup> John 14:16.