

Great Expectations©

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

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With Christmas past and even the celebration of the Wise Men finding baby Jesus being over as well, what do we, in the church, celebrate and look for now? We are in-between the Christmas Season and Lent, that is coming up very quickly. Our liturgical calendar we follow calls this "Ordinary Time."

Ordinary Time is **most** of the time in our lives. Some liturgical calendars call this the Season of Epiphany and, I think that is very much what it is.

Epiphany is the time for "seeing" in a different way. You know, those times when you might be looking at something you've seen before, but suddenly it is new, and different ... clearer, as if you had been looking through a foggy window, and it was suddenly wiped clean and now you can really see!

I confess that I find it a little difficult each year when we have to make the leap from the nativity that held the new born baby ... to the swirling, baptismal waters of the Jordan where the grown up Jesus entered in with all the other humans.

Here He is, now, at the age of 30, ready to start His ministry. And He goes into the waters of the Jordan River where crowds of people have already been confessing their sins and being washed clean in the waters of baptism.

And the first thing many of us wonder is "why?" Why would the Son of God need to be baptized anyway? If He was without sin, as the Scriptures tell us, then why enter into a baptism of repentance of sin, which is what we are told is the baptism John the Baptist was doing?

John the Baptist actually gives us a hint as we look for the answer. John himself said to the people as they were wondering if he, John, was the Messiah:

"No," he says, "I baptize you with water, but there is one coming who is more powerful than I, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" ... and then he adds "and with fire" too.

Sounds ... kind of scary. What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit? And what does He do with the fire? It's one thing to repent of sin and be washed with water, but how will I be baptized with fire?

Let's look at Jesus ... whose name means ... "one who saves." Jesus, whom the angels said will be called "Emmanuel" ... which means "God is with us." Jesus ... the one John, the gospel writer, called "The Word" ... that was in the beginning, and that nothing ever existed without Him.

This is the Word that became flesh and lived among humans. The Son of God ... God incarnate ... who became one of us, so much so that He enters into the very waters where – metaphorically – we might say our sins mingle together, and wash over His human flesh ... flesh that would be killed for those very sins.

And after Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us that as Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit came down and hovered over Him in the form of a dove, and the voice of God affirmed what the angels had proclaimed at Jesus' birth ... "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am very pleased."

This is not the beginning of Jesus being God's Son, but it is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is the beginning of the power of God being manifested through Jesus, the Christ. (*Christ* is the same word as *Messiah*, which means "the anointed one of God.")

Jesus relates to, and becomes one with, the people as He enters those baptismal waters. But Jesus also is now the one who has the power to actually forgive those sins that have been confessed. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and He empowers us with that same Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God that burns away the old and makes way for the new.

Growing up on a little ranch on the Oklahoma prairie, it was an ordinary sight to go outside in an evening in the spring and see, on every horizon around us, fires burning off the old grass so that the new could spring up.

It was frightening sometimes. And there were times when my dad would be burning and it would get out of control and he would put out a call for all of us to jump in and help. We would get old gunny sacks and wet them down and beat that fire until it was back under control.

I think of that when I hear John say, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire." He burns off the old so that the new can grow.

When you think about it ... it's not always easy to walk into those waters of baptism. The scripture story makes it sound quiet and fairly calm. But if you think back over history, those saints who went before us ... who walked through those waters and went through the fires of Holy Spirit – empowering them with a passion for spreading the Good News ... well, they didn't have it so easy.

In fact, ordinary time for them wasn't always so ordinary. It became extraordinary as they found themselves burning sometimes, not by the Holy Spirit, but in the flames of persecution. They found themselves riding the high waves of rough, rough waters. They found sorrow, and violence and pain and loss.

But they knew that Jesus, the Savior, the anointed one of God, had entered into their very ordinary lives by entering into the waters of baptism. And that as He obediently did that act, He was empowered, and because He was, so were they. And they could stand firm in the faith, which they proclaimed because they knew they were forgiven and freed and that nothing, no nothing, not even death could separate them from the love and the power of God.

Isaiah's beautiful words, as God spoke to the people ... and continues to speak through the years to us all ... take on a new and powerful meaning as we hear those words of assurance and love and affirmation:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 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.” He promised that to Jesus, and He promises it to us, as well.

As a minister, I have presided over many funerals in the 19 years I've been ordained, some of them have been beloved members here at Holly Presbyterian Church.

Because I have used the liturgy so often and because I think the Holy Spirit has put a love for caring for families in that difficult time in my heart, I find that liturgy is on my mind so often.

I can honestly say that it is because of the privilege of being a minister for people in that time of grief, that my faith is what is today. It isn't just about what I do, as a pastor, but it's often about the deep witness to the faith that I experience in the families who are in grief.

I had the opportunity to be a chaplain at the University Hospital in Iowa City – as part of my training for ministry. One of my units to serve was the Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant Unit. I was amazed, and my faith was strengthened, as I witnessed the strong faith of moms and dads who were there – some of them far from home – to live and to be with their children who had cancer.

There was never a parent I talked with who asked “why us?” Not one of them showed anything but faith and trust that their child was in the hands of God. They believed their child would heal, but even in that last week that I was there, when three of those children I met on my first day passed away – even then, those grief-stricken parents proclaimed their faith and trust in God.

Thinking through what I believe about God in relationship to our suffering is something I've done a lot of. It means more to me than I can ever tell you to know that God understands the pain of sin and suffering and death. God came to know it firsthand in His Son, Jesus.

Our faith in God and our baptism into the faith, does not mean that we will not have pain and grief. It means exactly what Isaiah tells us. “When we pass through the waters, when go through the flames,” God is with us.

It means that what the angels said ... that He is Emmanuel ... God with us ... is true ... that whatever we go through, we are never alone.

It means that the name Jesus is the best name ever ... because He is the one who saves. We have our sins, not just washed away with water, but burned away forever with new ground ready for growth. It means that in His death and resurrection, the power of God in the Holy Spirit raises us up from death to new life as well. Again, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Because of this great promise, because of what Jesus has done in His life in His suffering and death, and because of His resurrection, we have great expectations! We have come to know the love and blessings God pours out on us, His children. We have believed the promises He has made to us – so much so that we expect they are true and that we will someday be with Him and our loved ones who have gone before us.

But, I think there are some great expectations that God has for us, too. We are called to be disciples of Jesus – to study and learn and to come to know Him so well that we have the privilege and honor – and responsibility – to speak out for justice for those who are oppressed; to care for the poor and needy; to visit the sick; to pray for one another.

In a few minutes we will have the great joy of ordaining two women who have come to believe in their hearts that they are called by Christ to serve as elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and we will be installing them and another who has answered the call to serve on the session for another term.

There are great expectations put on all those who are elders. They are taking on a joyful work that can sometimes feel more like a heavy burden. Yesterday, at our Session and Team retreat, we reviewed the Constitutional Questions that these elders will be answering – promising to do. They are serious vows to take and they are not taking them lightly.

We have expectations for them – that they will keep those promises. But, there are also great expectations for all of you, as well. We talked yesterday about how the Holy Spirit equips us all – all believers – with gifts to serve the church so that the church can accomplish the ministry and mission that God leads us to.

These elders – all of our elders – are serious about the teams they are leading. And they have great expectations that you who answer the questions to support them in their work will do that with prayer and with giving your time and energy to help on one of the

teams. It is through the ministry of the teams that elders lead that we accomplish the mission we are called to.

Jesus began his ministry with baptism. His life was a model for us to follow. He gave Himself – His energy, His love, His time, His life for us and He calls us to serve as He has served us.

When we were baptized it was the beginning of our life in Christ and the beginning of a ministry in and for Him who has great expectations for us.

At your baptism, you were not only baptized with water, but you were also filled with the Holy Spirit.

May we all, as we ordain and install our elders – our leaders – pay very close attention to the vows they make and may we too, make those promises of faith and service.

Amen.

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