

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

Proclaiming Promises
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December 20, 2009

This may seem like a strange text for Christmas Sunday. It should have been the one used last Sunday according to the Lectionary—but someone looked at the wrong selection in their sermon planner! After discovering my mistake, after it was too late to change things for last Sunday, I had to decide if I should just switch the text or should I just go with the traditional Christmas story? After reading the Luke text and praying I decided to stay with the text – mostly because of Luke’s words, “As the people were filled with expectation...” (3:15).

These are days of expectation. One of the young men in our Wings program was more excited than normal on Thursday. He just couldn’t be still. As he was dancing by me he said, “I’m so excited that Christmas is only a week away. I just can’t wait.” And he danced on. There is something in the air that brings a sense of expectation to his life. There was a sense of expectation in the air as John comes on the scene.

John brings a sense of expectation to the people. Years have passed since the night in Bethlehem. If they knew the story of that night they have probably forgotten the events of those past years. Now John has come on the scene in dramatic fashion. He dresses wildly, has never shaved or had a hair cut and eats a strange diet. His coming brings a sense of expectation to the people, “Could this be the Messiah?” They were not sure what to expect – but here is John calling them back to God. He urges them to share what they have with those in need (3:11). He demands from the tax collectors who come that they stop extorting the people (3:12) and he even makes similar demands on the Roman soldiers who are listening (3:14). He is calling for a dramatic change in their lifestyles. He is calling the people back to where they care one for the other.

Do they recall the prophecy of Zephaniah? They could be confused. Zephaniah seems to expect the restoration of Israel to a great world power. He sees the fortunes of the nation restored and a King coming who brings judgment. Does John fit into this mold? He certainly talks about God’s judgment but this is not what they had expected. John’s words are about another who is coming who is greater than he is. The one who is coming will be greater than John – the world is alive with expectation.

Advent days are filled with expectation. What are we expecting? As we prepare again for the celebration of the coming of the King what are we expecting?

Now I can get into trouble without much work on my part. Even sermon titles have gotten me in trouble. A few years ago I chose, “Let’s Burn the Manger” as my title. This did not set well with many people. Now the theme was that it is easy to wrap up the baby and put him back in the box to bring out again in another year. We tenderly wrap the infant Jesus and the crèche and put them away for safe keeping until next Christmas – but it is far more difficult to wrap a grown man hanging on a cross back in a box. The manger is only the beginning of the story. John’s coming was only the second chapter in the story. We cannot forget that over Bethlehem looms the shadow of a cross. We must be prepared to hear and tell the whole story.

This text in Luke reminds us that the story is just beginning. John has begun to prepare the way. There is a sense of expectation in the air – but the story is not John – the story is Jesus, the grown-up baby from the manger. The Good News is that God is moving to redeem a people. However the people God is redeeming is an inclusive people. Those who have stood on the outside are now being invited in. It is Magi, outsiders, who seek the child born in Bethlehem. They come with gifts for a King – God’s promises are being proclaimed to all peoples.

What are we expecting from God this Christmas? What promises do we want to claim or proclaim to the world?

The more I think about these questions the harder it is for me to answer them. It is hard for me to discern what I want from God. God is not a cosmic Santa who fills my wish list but this is how I sometimes find myself praying. I struggle to not see God as my special Santa, fulfilling my wish list. It is not as easy as it may seem not to pray this way. For what should I pray?

Let me explain. You see, if I pray for world peace it will not happen unless I am willing to work for world peace. If I pray for the hungry to be fed it will not happen unless I am willing to feed those who are hungry around me. Or, the naked will not be clothed unless I am willing to clothe those in need around me.

As I look at our “blanket” tree I am reminded that we are working towards helping those in need in the world. When I thought of the idea and presented it to the Board I was thinking that 50 blankets would be a good goal. However I did not share the number I had in mind with anyone. I gave the material to Mary Ellen and she said she would work up some bulletin inserts and a bulletin board (thanks!). When she showed me the material she had 100 blankets as our goal. Even though I thought this may be a little too high, I said nothing. After all she knows you better than I do – as of today we have gone over our goal! (We are now at 114!) We are doing more than pray; we are praying and then doing what we can to answer our prayer.

In other words, part of the way my prayers are answered is if I work to accomplish them along with God. Yes, there are some prayers that can only be answered by divine intervention. But should I pray for things I am not willing to work for? Is not part of the expectation my doing my part?

Advent and Christmas are our reminders of God’s love, of God fulfilling the promises made through the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zephaniah and others. Advent and Christmas are our reminders that we are God’s ambassadors in this world – the message we live out through our lives speaks to a broken world.

What are we expecting from God this Christmas? Not from Santa, but from God? And how are we going to accomplish it?

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989