

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 9, 2022

What are we waiting for?

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So we tortured our children this Christmas. Quite the confession I know, but before you start looking up the number for Child Protective Services, let me explain! You see, our Christmas guests were not arriving until the evening of December 26th. So here's how we tortured our children, we forced them to wait until the morning of December 27th to open most of their presents. They were allowed to open a couple on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas Day; but I have a feeling that may have actually made the waiting worse for them!

Waiting is hard, isn't it? And not just for children if we're honest about it. Adults may be able to handle periods of waiting better than children, but I have as yet to encounter anyone who claims to actually **enjoy** waiting. Now add in expectation or anticipation and you've likely just made the waiting even worse. Waiting for something to happen is one thing, but expecting something to happen is a whole new level of waiting. And it only gets more unbearable when you trust the source of your expectation.

Put yourself now in the shoes of someone in the crowd listening to John preach on the banks of the Jordan River. His testimony is powerful and he is clearly a prophet. He even looks and sounds like a prophet, quoting Isaiah, Malachi, and others too. And there's the torture part of this waiting and expecting. What does John preach about? The coming of God's Kingdom, ruled by God's anointed King and Messiah. What were those prophets of old preaching about? The coming of God's Kingdom, ruled by God's anointed King and Messiah.

The people of Israel have been waiting, expectantly, for the coming of God's Kingdom and the anointed Messiah for over 800 years!! With that in mind let's hear what verse 15 has to say again, "As the people were filled

with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”¹ 800 years...filled with expectation seems like the understatement of the century...or eight centuries. It also goes to show why the crowds were “questioning in their hearts” whether John was the Messiah. After all, they’ve been waiting for the promised one to come for a **very** long time.

All in all our children handled the torture of waiting two extra days to open presents fairly well. Certainly better than the crowds at the Jordan River. But to be fair, two days is nothing compared to 800 years. Why don’t I think very highly of the crowd’s ability to expectantly wait? Mostly because they completely miss the exact thing they’ve been waiting so expectantly for! They miss the anointing of Jesus as King and Messiah despite the fact that it takes place right in their midst.

Luke does not provide much fanfare for Jesus’ baptism. In Mark you’ve got the heaven’s being torn open, in Matthew you’ve got the back and forth between Jesus and John, and in John’s Gospel we have John the Baptizer loudly calling Jesus the Lamb of God and testifying that he saw the spirit settle on Jesus when he was baptized. Luke has hardly any of that! Which begs the question, why?

There are all sorts of theories as to why Luke seems to downplay the baptism of Jesus. Many commentators suggest that Luke is trying to make it clear that John is subordinate to Jesus and does so by largely omitting John from the actual baptism of Jesus (in the whole two verses Luke dedicates to the baptism). Others suggest that Luke is more concerned with the two different messages of John and Jesus and that he wants to move from John’s exhortations to the message of Christ in a clear and delineated way.

Both of these could be true, but I think there’s another option that could be at play here as well. What if Luke is merely reflecting how misguided human expectations can be; especially when it comes to God? It wouldn’t even be the first time Luke has done this, even though we’re barely two and half chapters in to the Gospel. Take Luke’s opening verses for example, starting after the dedication to Theophilus: “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the

¹ Luke 3:15 (NRSV)

priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”² Given these verses we might expect Aaron and Elizabeth to be important figures in Luke’s gospel, but we won’t hear of them again after the second chapter. How about their son, John? He won’t figure all that prominently in Luke’s gospel either; though we’ll hear a bit more about him than we do his parents!

The second chapter of Luke starts off with a similar sort-of expectation setting. We read: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.”³ Once again, Luke seems to be setting up our expectations only to subvert them. He begins this section by naming some important people, but then he pivots from the center of the Roman Empire to the tiny village of Bethlehem; from some of the most important figures of the time, to two nobodies named Mary and Joseph.

Luke seems to understand how human expectations work. He then uses that expectation to surprise us with how God works; which is **vastly** different from how we do things. Why did the expectant crowds miss the coming of God’s Kingdom and the anointing of the chosen Messiah? Because it didn’t come in the way they were expecting. They thought John might be close, but he still wasn’t quite right. Then along comes Jesus, he is quietly baptized and in prayer afterwards God anoints him for his mission and ministry. But Jesus wasn’t what the people we expecting, and so they missed the event they’d been expectantly waiting for.

I worry sometimes that we miss what God is up to because it’s not what we expect too. There’s a quote I read recently by Stephen Gould about the fervor over studying Einstein’s brain that erupted after he died. The quote goes like this: “I am, somehow, less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein’s brain than in the near certainty that people of

² Luke 1:5-7 (NRSV)

³ Luke 2:1-4 (NRSV)

equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.”⁴ People are too often overlooked because they aren’t what others expect them to be.

But God routinely works in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. And I believe that is, at least in part, to get us to look with new eyes at the world, and especially the people, around us. As Christians we believe in the doctrine of *imago dei*, which is to say that all people are made in the image of God. One of the results of this precept is that Christians understand that when we look at the people around us we are looking upon the very face of God. And perhaps we ought to expect to see God at work in their lives, and God at work in **our** lives through them!

How have we missed God at work in our lives and in the world because it wasn’t what we were expecting? And yet, God continues to operate this way. There’s something important about human expectations and God’s subversion of them. So, what are you expecting? And how might God be about to turn that upside down? Who do you think you have figured out? And how might God be about to completely surprise you through them?

What are we waiting for? Christ to come again. And in the meantime Christ is constantly coming to us, if we know where to look. If we know what to expect. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, “The Panda’s Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History,” 1992.