

Last week-end, the week-end right after Thanksgiving, signs of the next holiday began to show up in my neighborhood.

Hanging from balconies, festooning patios, posted on windows and doors.

Lights that twinkle in the night and words that announce from doors and windows.

Words like Joy. Believe. Give thanks. Words like merry, and blessed.

These are the hopes and the longings of my neighbors.

Their *great expectations* for the season ahead.

Maybe even, great expectations for life itself.

Joy. Blessed. Believe. Gratitude.

To have expectations-- great *and* small,
is part of what makes us who we are, I think.

Our expectations—for joy or blessing, for merry times or trust and belief
are gifts we want to receive.

They may be gifts we want *others* to receive.

Expectations for a child to have joy. Expectations for a parent to have peace.

What we long for, what we hope for—that's part of what makes us, us.

The crowds that came down to the Jordon River to visit John the Baptizer,
they were a people who had great expectations.

In fact, they came to be baptized because of their expectations.

They came with a readiness to meet, to receive,
whatever their wonderful, faithful God had in mind to give them.

Their expectations, the expectations of the individual Jews
who came to the water may have been slightly varied,
the details as unique as the individuals who carried them

But they likely shared a common theme:

that God save them from the oppressive lives they lived
under the Roman occupation. That God provide them a pathway to escape

from the indignities, the economic hardships, the loss of identity
that comes from being an occupied land.

They longed for what God promised—a time of peace so thorough,
so complete,
that even lion and lamb-natural enemies,
became each other's best companion.

So safe that an young child could be in the most perilous position,
and yet remain unharmed.

Their hopes, the great expectations weren't so different than ours.
For a little more security. For a little more dignity, maybe.
Maybe a little more freedom, or an opportunity to better their lot in life.
For joy, and a reason to give thanks.

Their tradition had taught them to expect that change would
come in the form of a messiah, God's anointed change agent.
And the change they expected would be rescue from the
perilous circumstances of Roman occupation.

To restore them to lives that brought the peace they long for.

Expectations not so different from us.

And so to the Jordan they came, with great expectations,
to prepare for the new life God would bring.

And then there are the Pharisees, the Sadducees.

This story isn't complete without them.

In truth, they longed for the very same things.

As leaders, they longed not only for the deliverance of themselves—
but they longed for the deliverance of all the Jewish people.

It must have been a heavy burden—the responsibility
to get ready a people for God's blessing.

But they didn't handle it well.

They did what leaders sometimes do—they put their trust in the rules.

Follow the rules and messiah will surely come, they taught.

All the rules that had developed over the life of Judaism—
rules about what can or can never, happen on the Sabbath.

Rules about what to eat, and how to cook it.

Rules that were, in fact, only customs, many of them.

Rules whose purpose was long forgotten.

Empty habits that had been created, maybe even for good reason,
but which, in reality,
now worked at cross-purposes with the God they worshipped.

Things would get better, the Pharisees and Sadducees believed,
only if the Jewish people rigorously kept the customs that defined them,
that set them apart from the other groups:
the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Moabites.

All through her nearly 1000 year history,
Israel had relied on their customs to remind them who they are,
to keep them together as a group.

Those who had responsibility to teach the rules, to enforce the rules,
the Sadducees, the Pharisees—
of course they had the hardest time letting go of their grip on the details,
and the very customs that got in the way of God's loving purposes.

Interestingly, eventually, it will be the Pharisees and the Sadducees
who will eventually breath life back into Judaism,
but that's the story for another day.

So, here is John, come to the Jordon River to
help people get ready to receive what God promises—new life.

But first they need to repent—to turn around.
First they need to turn around so they can see things from a different angle.

Not through custom will they learn to see the messiah.

The rescue that God is sending now, they will recognize a different way.

To see it, they will need to look in a different direction.

For God is sending help now.

God won't be waiting for the Pharisees or the Sadducees to get it right.

Teaching the people that custom alone, rule-following alone,
identity alone --will save them,

this is what has gotten the people off track

It hasn't delivered the peace to their hearts or
the hope to their lives that God alone brings. .

Things *have* gotten things off track. John sees that,
and he sees that God is already at work
to cut down the folly that custom alone can save the people.

The good news that John has come to announce is that God is coming now,
and will break all expectations the human mind can invent.

The pathway to peace and harmony?

The road to safety, to a secure future?

You won't find it by following the rules perfectly.

The great might of Rome can't secure it.

Human imagination alone can never achieve it.

All we can do, all we can ever do is to make that turn,
embrace that new perspective that the prophets have always announced
and that Jesus himself will soon teach.

All we can do is change the direction we face,
to take on a new perspective,
God's perspective.

All we can ever do is offer our burdened hearts, so that God can transform us.

All we can ever do is to open our hearts as we wait,
and let God burn all those fears, and bad habits
and trust in the wrong things,
let God burn away the chaff of our lives:
all the things that keep us from being whole
and holy from being servants of God's goodness,

And so we wait, hearts open, for the arrival of salvation
that will come in ways we least expect,
but probably won't be able to even see, unless we've turned around
and offered our hearts for God's transformation.

This morning, as this service began, we sang John's words of promise.
Isaiah's ancient instruction to prepare,
for God is coming to his people again.

Ready the road, prepare the highway;

Flowers fade, like the grass our works decay, the power and the might of
the nations, they will pass away.

But God's promise never passes away—he will right the wrongs, he will feed
the flock, he will bring them into the fold again.

The lion and the lamb—enemies will reconcile. The nursing child?
In peril will be no more.

This God promises to us,
when we turn,
when we learn to look with new eyes
and to live in new ways.

When we let the chaff,
the habits, or customs, or the shell around our hearts,
when we let God burn that away.

When we make a road in the desert,
God comes to us bringing that peace which comes from God alone.

I'll close with St. Paul's words from Romans:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement
grant you to live in harmony with one another,
in accordance with Jesus Christ,
so that you may with one voice glorify the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.