

Wondering and Confirmation

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

Luke 3:15-17, 21-23

In my early 20s I had the privilege of making arrangements for about 25 members of the Calvin University staff and faculty to attend an out of state conference. This was work I hadn't done before, and I wanted it to go well. But there was a problem: I had been hired into the job in the middle of the year, not long after the previous staff member had left for a different position. We hadn't had much time for on-the-job orientation. I couldn't make heads or tails of the file I'd inherited for the project.

I had registration records for some, but not all of the attendees. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but one of the most critical registrations seemed to be missing: I had no record of a registration for the college President. I scoured the files to no avail and finally brought this to the attention of my boss. I hoped she could shed some light on the matter. But she didn't know what we were looking for either. The fact that the record was missing set off alarm bells for her too: "Oh, we have to nail that one, Kristy," she said. In other words, do whatever it takes; call whoever needs to be called, but figure this out. We need to know what the conference and hotel are expecting, and, to make better arrangements if something's missing. If the President is taking time out of a packed schedule for this event, this needs to be just right.

Reading about John the Baptist's ministry tonight reminds me of that feeling of motivated expectation, the need to be prepared when something or someone important comes into our orbit. As we turn the chapter over from the Christmas stories of Luke 2, we fast forward about 25 years to the prelude of Jesus' public ministry. And John the Baptist's fiery preaching in the wilderness certainly motivates people to get ready for God. Because they're expectant, but not prepared.

Luke sets the stage for John's ministry starting "when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...." This opening sentence reads right by for us as dusty history in the 20th century. But Luke's opening verses in this chapter tell us that things are "off" politically and religiously in this time and place. The time is ripe for God to do a new thing for his people. The Jews are ruled politically by Rome under the local authority of the sons of Herod the Great. And this ruling family is not a functional family. Herod the Great is the Herod who built the Temple in Jerusalem. He's the one who met with the Magi about the new "King of the Jews" before ordering the killing of all the baby boys near Bethlehem to eliminate any potential competitors to his throne. Now, his sons Herod Philip and Herod Antipas and Roman-appointed governors rule the places that John and Jesus call home. Suffice it to say this is not a ruling family whose goal is to serve and protect those they govern.

Luke gives us a hint that things aren't healthy religiously either. When he says John's ministry is beginning "during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas," this should set off alarm bells for us. Because, well, which is it? The high priesthood of Annas, or the high priesthood of Caiaphas? There's usually one high priest. But not today. Today there's Annas, a former high priest with lots of continuing influence who had been deposed by Gratus, a local Roman governor. And there's Annas's son-in-law Caiaphas, the more recent Roman appointee.

So when, in our passage, Luke says, "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah, this is an understatement. The time is ripe. They are ready for new leadership. Some of their hopes are religious; some of their hopes are political. The Jewish people have been longing for a solution to Roman occupation. They're looking for someone who will come in, fight off the Romans, and create a political and religious space where they can worship God and conduct their lives in peace and stability. What they're looking for is so very understandable.

In this swirl of political and religious unsettledness, in the quiet margins of the wilderness, the Word of God comes to John. Drawn by this strange preacher, crowds come flocking to him. John is not especially gentle in his pronouncements. But the time is ripe and his message is urgent. He's supposed to get the people ready, to help them pay attention and see the time of a new king's coming to them. It's time to roll out the red carpet. When God's salvation comes, they need to have lives ready to submit to his rule. They need to be primed to see it and receive it, not be blown away by it. And the way to get ready to see is to receive John's baptism. John calls them to be washed publicly as a sign of a heart-change on the inside. There's nothing like a public washing to make someone accountable for the new life they say they want. In John's baptism, the people were saying they wanted to turn toward God, not just today at the Jordan River, but every day in the way they lived.

The people can't help but wonder.... Could it be? Is it possible? You know, he sort of sounds like.... Elijah? Is this man possibly the Messiah, God's anointed? John's answer leaves no room for doubt; he is NOT the one. In fact, he's not even worthy to untie the Messiah's shoes. The baptism of repentance John's offering doesn't hold a candle to the power of the one who is to come: The Messiah's baptism will be with the Holy Spirit and refining fire. John knows without a doubt that his call is to be the one who prepares the way for God's Messiah. But he can't and won't fulfill the people's Messiah-sized expectations. John's just the messenger. Some of you carrying heavy burdens right now need to hear just exactly this tonight...if you're holding something that's too big and too heavy for you, it might be because what you're holding is God's job and not yours. You are a messenger of God's kingdom, but you can't bring it about.

Despite his sense of unworthiness to even untie the Messiah's shoes, John is a part of this coming work of God. He's called on not only to baptize the people, but also to baptize God's Messiah. In the heyday of religious and political expectation, on the crowded and muddy banks of the Jordan River a quiet but powerful thing happens. Can you picture it? People of all social classes and ethnicities coming to listen to John's sermons. Dirty water and parting clouds. One roughly-clothed man dipping the other into the river. A dove descending and resting on Jesus as the water streams from his body. Jesus who has no need to repent - Jesus who IS the Messiah everyone else is being baptized to prepare for - Jesus is baptized too. It takes your breath away with its unexpectedness. The way Matthew tells it, John tries to talk Jesus out of this crazy idea. "I need to be baptized by you," John says - "and do you come to me?" But Jesus tells him, "Do it."

Luke says that as Jesus was praying, "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." I've always imagined this voice to be louder and more public than I think it actually was. The voice that speaks new things into being seems like it would be loud. But now, I think this commissioning and blessing was a very powerful but mostly quiet encounter. I'm not sure how many onlookers caught on to what was happening. Did people even see, even with all their Messianic expectation, this rending of heaven and the descent of the Spirit? Or were they paying attention to other things? Were they looking for the King's anointing closer to the centers of human power? Did people just miss what was happening right in front of them?

John's gospel reports that John the Baptist saw the dove come from heaven and remain on Jesus. But in Luke and Mark, the voice seems to be mostly for Jesus' ears and Jesus' benefit. It addresses Jesus directly. No gospel writer gives us a clear indication that John or the crowd heard the voice, or that the crowd responded to this moment when heaven and earth intersected. It makes me wonder how often I might miss the work of God's Spirit because I'm not looking for it in unexpected places. And also, could it be that Jesus, in the fullness of his humanity as well as the fullness of his divinity, needs to hear and know the smile of his Father over him? Could it be that this is a moment of empowerment and commissioning for the cup he will drink?

Could it be that Jesus' primary identity is being recognized first in his baptism - not in the family tree that will follow? That his identity is both Son of God, the one conceived and anointed by God's Spirit; at the same time as he is the Son of Man, in the line of a human family? Could it be that Jesus himself will lean into

the strong memory of the Father's delight spoken over him as he soon faces down the biblical but twisted lies of the accuser for 40 days alone in the wilderness?

John says, I shouldn't even untie your shoes. And Jesus says, I know this doesn't make sense now. But baptize me. Because I'm here to put my feet in your shoes. That's part of what his baptism signifies. In his baptism, Jesus identifies himself with people who do need repentance and forgiveness. He identifies himself with us. Calvin says Jesus' baptism is an act that shows his full obedience to the Father; and an act that "consecrate[s] baptism in his own body, that we might have it in common with him." Jesus is baptized to serve us. He takes our humanity along with his divinity into the Jordan. He submits to a washing he doesn't need, a judgment on sin he doesn't deserve, so that we can be identified as clean as he is in our own baptisms. John says that he baptizes with water, but that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. We hear in John's message about Jesus' baptism echoes of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God comes in tongues of fire on believers and empowers them for ministry to the world in Jesus' name.

Living our own baptism means that we can lean on the same Spirit of God who was there at Jesus' baptism. That same Spirit is hovering and present at ours. Think about that. Throughout our lives with Christ this same Spirit continues to be poured out over us and into us and through us.

Like the people coming out to John in the wilderness seeking Messiah, the Spirit's dwelling in our lives doesn't mean that our hopes for what God will do and what God is actually doing as he redeems the world he loves will always match up. It doesn't mean we will always perceive what God is up to clearly - John, who was filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth, understood who Jesus was in part -he asks Jesus later, are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? We leave the Messiah-sized expectations up to the one who was to come, who has come, and who will come again.

But being baptized in Jesus' name also means who we are and what we do is meaningful, powerful, delighted in and used by God. God speaks his yes over our lives and calls us to serve in his kingdom. And we are doing our part to roll out the red carpet, preparing the way in our own lives and neighborhoods and workplaces for his presence. We ask him to open our eyes, hearts, and hands so that when the Spirit is nudging or prodding we see, hear, and respond. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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