

“Singing with Expectation”

16 December 2018: 3rd Sunday of Advent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 3:7-18

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“That is a good book which is opened with expectation and closed with profit”

Amos Bronson Alcott (—*Table Talk*).

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The Boston Globe used to carry a daily column designed to answer readers’ queries. On one occasion the newspaper listed the top ten unanswerable questions generated from the column. Here is one such question: “I am nine years old and have a cat that eats regularly and needs to go on a diet. He also eats mice when he is out. How many calories in a mouse (*Sunshine Magazine*, only attribution)?

A friend once asked Isidor Rabi, a Nobel Prize winner, how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that daily his mother would talk of his school day. She wasn’t so much interested in what he learned, but always inquired, “Did you ask a good question today?” “Asking good questions,” Rabi said, “made me become a scientist.”

Not accidently, Luke portrays Jesus, even as a pre-teen, as full of wisdom. Luke writes: “After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). Our morning’s text fixes on a series of questions. Asking the questions are John the Baptist and the audience to whom John speaks. Hear our morning’s lesson:

[7] John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

[10] And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” [11] In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” [13] He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” [14] Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

[15] As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, [16] John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [17] His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” [18] So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people” (Luke 3:7-18).

The crowds come to hear John preach and baptize them. But John afflicts them, calling them “a brood of vipers,”—no way to begin a sermon. Vipers are desert creatures. John’s insult is equal to calling someone in Texas “a snake in the grass.”

After getting the crowd's attention via this speaking ruse, John commands them to repent. The word in Greek (*metenoia*) literally means "returning," "about face," or "to turn around." John told the people they were heading in the wrong direction. Yet the crowd thought, "We are the chosen people—children of Abraham!" But John snarls, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." John's sermon ends abruptly when he tells the audience that there are two kinds of trees: fruitful and unfruitful. Into the fire go the bad trees and John's implication seems clear enough.

As a result of John's potent message, Luke describes three different groups that ask John, in one way or another, responsive questions: "What then should we do?" John's answer is direct. Those who ask "What then should we do?" should share what they have for this is a sign of repentance. I once heard a story that shows why sharing is a sign of penitence. Those who do not share do not have not the spirit of Christ.

A local United Way office realized that it had never received a donation from the town's most successful miser. The person in charge of contributions called him to persuade him to contribute. "Our research shows that out of a yearly income of at least \$500,000, you give not a penny to charity. Wouldn't you like to give back to the community in some way?"

The miser mulled this over for a moment and replied, "First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has medical bills that are several times her annual income?"

Embarrassed, the United Way representative mumbled, "Um . . . No."—or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?" The stricken United Way rep began to stammer out an apology but was interrupted, "—or that my sister's husband died in a traffic accident," the miser's voice rising in indignation, "leaving her penniless with three children?!"

The mortified United Way rep, utterly beaten, said simply, "I had no idea . . ."

On a roll, the miser cut him off again: ". . . so if I don't give any money to them, why should I give any to you?"

John the Baptizer knew that people with a repentant heart will share God's blessing with others. The "crowds" (v. 10) are probably ordinary people; perhaps they should have a selfless concern for the underprivileged.

In addition to the generic crowd, Luke tells us that John the Baptizer met both tax collectors and soldiers. Luke writes "Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' " John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Tax collectors bid on tax districts and made their living by paying the Romans a set amount for their territory. Any money collected over that set amount the tax collectors kept. Thus, if they collected more than agreed, they pocketed the difference—often a substantial sum.

Soldiers also asked, "And we, what should we do?" The populace of Judea despised soldiers, as they did tax collectors. Some "soldiers" were likely Jews in the service of Herod Antipas. John tells them that they should follow the emperor's guidelines on military conduct. That the answer to the question "What should we do?" here and elsewhere indicates that simply following rules is not adequate. Just treat other people as human beings is not enough. People of faith must ask again and again in openness to

God's will: "What should we do?" The quality of our questions determines our response as well as the quality of our lives.

Bill Caudill, the fine architect, teacher, and author, served for many years on the Herman Miller [a remarkably flourishing furniture company] board of directors. In that role, Bill made a unique and priceless contribution. [As Max Dupree tells it] . . . Selecting Bill for our board was, as for every member, a serious matter. We work from a written statement of criteria for board membership, and we seek a diverse group of members so that we can meet the diverse needs of the corporation. When I went to Houston to ask Bill whether he might consider serving on the board, he was immediately interested.

An architect, Bill was aware of Herman Miller's reputation, but he wasn't going to consent immediately. He had some questions of his own and sought answers. He wanted to visit Zeeland, Michigan, the community that hosts our corporate headquarters and main manufacturing site. On the appointed day of his visit, he walked into my office midmorning, shook my hand, and said that yes, he would serve on Herman Miller's board of directors.

You can imagine my curiosity about how he had arrived at his decision. I asked if he would like to discuss anything further. He told me that he had found out everything he needed to know that morning at Bosch's restaurant in Zeeland, one of those typical Midwestern, small-town institutions where local folks gather to sort out hometown matters and world affairs.

Bill had joined one of the groups he found at a large table and had quizzed them about Herman Miller and its standing in the community. He told them that he was being considered for a position on Herman Miller's board of directors. What did they think of that? After talking to Bill, understanding who he was, and answering his questions, together they agreed that Bill should accept the position. Then he had driven to the local cemetery to make sure that only live plants and fresh flowers were allowed on the graves. He said, "I couldn't work in a town where they use plastic flowers" (Max Dupree, *Leadership Jazz*, Dell Books, New York, 1992, p. 122-124).

These are the kinds of questions that define the quality of one's life. When the crowd, the tax collectors, and the soldiers asked good questions of John the Baptizer, I wonder if John thought the time for the Kingdom of God had arrived. We will be singing of expectation because it is one of the blessed ways we express our faith.

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