

Great Expectations
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
17 December 2006
Text: Luke 3:7-18

Call it a Freudian slip, or a laughable irony, or even subconscious messaging. My colleagues delighted in pointing out to me last week's bulletin notice: *Next Sunday there will be a congregational meeting to vote on the pastor's annual compensation.* And right below that: *Worship: Louise Westfall preaching, "Great Expectations."* Well. Never let it be said that the sermons from this pulpit aren't relevant! This is a sermon about expectation, and how that dynamic can shape our lives, our values, and our choices. It will suggest that most of our expectations are actually set too low; little more, for example, than what we hope to get paid for the work we do.

The season of Advent invites us to raise our sights, to break free from captivity to the way things are, so that we may envision the way things might become. The great expectation of the gospel is God's coming to earth; the transformation of this sweet and terrible old world into a place of peace, in which all people enjoy abundance and blessing.

Frankly it's hard to imagine, let alone expect. We know how it is. Perhaps that's why the Advent gospel lessons are so in your face. God has to get our attention. There is good news here, but it begins with bad news. Things have got to change. Much of the time we don't even realize our true condition, so spiritually out of touch and out of tune we are. There will be champagne and chocolate, but first, for our health, comes the spinach and oat bran.

With all the clarity that we can muster, let us scan the far horizon. Across the wilderness of war, beyond the valley of the shadow of death, in the face of mountainous odds and in the middle of rough places, let us look hard, let us listen with

full attention for the strident voice of one speaking a word from the Lord. [LUKE 3:7-18]

I'm underwhelmed by what Time magazine has christened "the new atheism." Spokesmen such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris decry religion and its outlandish hopes and inexplicable beliefs, in favor of sheer rationality. What you can see. What you can measure. What you can create and control. While I deeply appreciate the importance of intellectual thought and the wellspring of knowledge flowing from scientific research, the mind has its limits. To make reason the bottom line, the sole foundation of reality in my view leaves one in a diminished state. It is to settle for less than who we are, to miss the essential part of our humanity which includes a transcendent soul, a spark of the Divine. Pascal, the philosopher-mathematician was right, "the heart has reasons, that reason knows nothing of."

And yet I wonder if we have not, at some level, settled for a rational faith. One we can manage. One that we control. One that makes the unknowable reasonable, the incomprehensible a little less mystery and a little more sensible. I wonder if we've down-shifted our hopes and aspirations because we simply can't imagine how the fantastic promises of Christian faith could possibly come true. Peace on earth, goodwill to all. The lion and the lamb, lying down together. A healed and restored universe, interdependent and whole. Oh really???

It's enough to make you think it's the Christians who need a reality check. Rejoice? Rejoice? Have you read the newspaper? Have you watched the news? Do you have any idea what's going on?!

Here's the deal, friends. Christian faith is vitally interested in the news. But it hears that news and thinks about the way things are through another lens, the reflection of God's intent to redeem the whole creation. Not just part of it; all of it. Not just the "right" people, or the ones who go along with the party line; all the people. For God so loved the world....

Announcing this good news is John the Baptist, but it doesn't sound like good news at first. There he is, annoying and persistent, disrupting and disturbing our efforts to be comforted, calm, and in control. He does not announce the coming of a soothing deity or a "don't worry-be happy" Jesus. He proclaims an ax-wielding, fire-kindling God, a powerful judge who will thresh the wheat from the chaff. One of the biblical commentaries I frequently use in study has a special section relating the text to children. For this Luke text, the preacher is urged not to place emphasis on John's call to repentance... and I agree with that point FOR CHILDREN. But we are not children. We adults are not served by a watered-down spirituality that softens the hard edges of the gospel in an attempt to make us feel better. Friends, the One who is coming will judge our lives according to the standard of God's Kingdom. Have we done justice? Have we loved kindness? Have we shown mercy? Have we loved well, even our enemies? Have we shared the abundance entrusted to us? Have we been honest in labor and compassionate in our treatment of others?

Advent calls us first to an honest assessment of our lives, individually, and as a church. Have we lived according to God's way? It's the spiritual version of "Are you ready for Christmas?" --and we know in our hearts we're not. But did you notice the text calls John's severe message the proclamation of "good" news? They were filled with expectation that he might be Messiah, the one coming to save them. No, he quickly responds, but I'm here to help you get ready. The judgment of God is not for our damnation; but for our salvation. If we think we've got it made, then what we have is all we'll ever get....a paltry serving when God has spread a feast.

For joy and peace that will last not for one day or one season only, but for always, John invites us to prepare. It's time to make changes; time to turn or return our lives toward God, to re-orient our living in preparation for the presence and rule of God on earth as it is in heaven.

What stuns me about those preparations is how....*practical* they are. Share what you have with the poor. Stop exploiting others by taking more than is just. End the violence which intimidates the weak and vulnerable and hurts everyone. Repentance is not so much theological affirmation as it is concrete behavior modification. We prepare for Christ's coming by living as if Christ were here. For so Christ is!

That's why the Church does what it does every day. Why we devote time and energy and our financial resources on programs that help people in need. It's why our youth will spend this afternoon shopping for toys and gifts for children who might not otherwise receive any. They're called "Jesus Gifts" by the way, because Jesus said when you give to the "least of these my brothers and sisters, you do so to me." It's why we publish a prayer list of persons who are ill or who have lost a loved one; why we take meals to members in times of recovery or challenge. The soft prayer shawls lovingly knit by a group of women in our church and given to house-bound or ill or grieving persons provide comfort and joy as a foretaste of the glory that is yet to come. Christ's presence with earth's residents is the motivation behind opening our church building to 12-step groups, Meals on Wheels, the Open Doors after-school program, and hospitality to homeless guests through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. A vision of God's Kingdom on earth animates the efforts to establish Heights Youth Club as a safe and positive place for young people to go after school. And it is why, my friends, your church bothers to wrestle with issues such as predatory lending or the minimum wage. It's not because we want to promote a particular political agenda—it's because we want to prepare together for the coming rule of God in which everyone will live in peace and enjoy the fruits of labor, with a grateful, joyous heart.

A church I read about has inscribed on its doors: *A vision without a task is but a dream, a task without a vision is drudgery, but a vision with a task is the hope of the world.*

God has given us a vision beyond imagination: a world that is just and peaceful. God sent Jesus to show us how to bring that vision to reality; even now he calls us to participate in the tasks of transformation.

So don't have yourselves a merry little Christmas! The promises of God are huge. Don't settle for a little, when God offers so much. Let us set about doing the tasks to which we are called—our work and worship—guided by great expectations and the unshakeable conviction that God has come to us; God is here with us. God is not finished with the church. God is not finished with the world. God will bring to completion all that has begun. Joy to the world!

NOW TO THE ETERNAL RULER OF ALL WORLDS, THE ONLY GOD,
BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor