

SERMON
“Awakenings”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Micah 5: 2-6

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth and he shall be the one of peace.

Matthew 2: 1-12

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

As the **people were filled with expectation**, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. John answered all of them 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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his thrashing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

SERMON

The people were living in expectation. And John the Baptist was baptizing and preaching...to “prepare the way of the Lord.” To do this, he gave a message of repentance and hope, and offered a free cleansing—a baptism. John was doing his part to prepare the way; but would he have achieved his purpose if the people had not been living in expectation? If the people had not been **looking hither and there for where God was active in their world**, would John’s ministry had prepared the way for Jesus? In observing John they wondered, could this be the hand of God at work through this man? They wondered if he was the Messiah.

“No,” said John, “I am not the one you live in expectation of receiving. I can only baptize you with water. Clean you up a little to receive the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

From John’s words and actions, **their expectation must have grown**. But I wonder if they would have received John’s message and cleansing if they had not been living in expectation? Do we have to expect a **spiritual awakening** in order for it to happen?

To “expect” means to believe with confidence, or to think it likely that an event will happen in the future. As the word is used here, it means to **look forward** for something to happen in the future. When we anticipate with confidence, that something promised will happen, our sensory antennas go on alert.

We expect a child home from college or a visit from an old beloved friend. What happens? We prepare for the arrival. We get the house ready. We cook special food. Even more important, our senses become fine-tuned. We find ourselves listening to every car that passes. Sounds become amplified. Our heart beats faster. We’re excited. We’re hopeful that’s them. We move faster. It’s hard to set still.

Thomas Carlyle, a Victorian author, wrote in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, “Revelation [a spiritual awakening] may depend first upon the individual.” Individuals may bring forth truths from heaven to try and get a fire going. Such fire will be a single flash, and will kindle nothing unless those to whom it comes have brought the fuel of some great desire that waits to be set ablaze in their own minds and hearts.¹

Expectation! I hear the hoof beats of camels on the sand and a man standing in the desert shouting, “Prepare you the way of the Lord.” I sometimes think the gospel writers were not so different in what they had to say, as in how they said it. Luke offers up expectancy with a long line of unclean people, filled with expectation, questioning in their hearts whether John was the One for whom they waited. While Matthew offers up expectancy with magi galloping across the desert with their regal robes flapping in the breeze.

Matthew, of all our gospel writers, writes to a Jewish audience. He tells his story to people steeped in knowledge of the prophets. He also tells it knowing the Jews have long lived in the expectation of the Messiah coming. He also tells it knowing the Jews expected the Messiah’s arrival to be a grand event. Not some event in a nowhere kind of village—far from all the action, in a stable.

So it is important for Matthew to cast the ones expecting this arrival, not as some people standing in a cleanup line, but as rich people, royal people, and exotic people coming to Jerusalem seeking to pay tribute. For, you see, some six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Jews had been sent away to Babylon (today’s Iraq) into exile. They grew weak in exile, a captive, enslaved people, reduced to running errands for the Iraqis, and they had been there for more than a couple of generations. At last they were freed. Freed to go home to their city of

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-worship*, 1841

Jerusalem, but the Jerusalem they knew was no more. The golden city they left, the one that lived in their memory, was now in ruin.

For these people Isaiah writes. Isaiah told these disheartened Jews of long ago, your city can be rebuilt. Once you rebuild it you will again be a great nation to whom Kings will again come. Kings from the East bearing all sorts of costly gifts will come. “Israel is going to again be a great international power,” says Isaiah, “and all these now powerful nations from the East will come knocking at your door, seeking your favor.

“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ... A multitude of camels shall cover you ... They shall bring gold and frankincense...” (Isaiah 60:3, 6)

Matthew knowing Isaiah’s promise says, “See!” It’s happening just like Isaiah predicted it would. You are going to be important again.”

Well, Herod hears that these exotic dignitaries are in town, and he also hears talk that this is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, what with all the camels, and gold and frankincense and other eerie similarities to Isaiah’s poem.

Now Herod was more than likely not one to live in the expectation of his fellow Jews. For the Kings of the world, “the have it all’s” of the world, do not live in expectation of what the future can bring. They have all one could ever expect in the present. They do not live in expectation, but in fear of losing what they have.

And the talk around town is scaring Herod. Why? Because, Matthew throws in a twist. The dignitaries in town come not to pay their respect to Herod or Jerusalem. They come looking for a new king, a child who has been born king of the Jews?

Herod, overcome with fear, summons the best rabbinical scholars of Jerusalem saying, “Tell me about Isaiah’s prediction, about all of these camels coming, about the gold and

frankincense they bear. When this happens is there supposed to be a new king? What's going on here? Could this be the Messiah they seek? Where is the Messiah to be born?

“King Herod,” they said your answer is in not in Isaiah 60, because that text says that Jerusalem will again be a powerful and wealthy nation, the very center of the world. It's clear this is not the case. Israel is but a puppet of Rome. In reference to your question about the Messiah, well now, that's another question to which the answer is found in Micah not Isaiah.

“Well, well you smart one, where is the messiah to be born?” So the rabbinical scholar read to him the passage from Micah 5: 2-4

“And you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth the one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days...and the people shall live secure, for he shall be great, to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” (Micah 5: 2, 4b, 5)

Now Herod has been awakened, but it is not a spiritual awakening born of God, but an awakening born of a fear that births evil.

“Well, well,” says Herod, “now I know where to find this little snake in the grass that will try to dethrone me.” So he calls these exotic visitors from the East with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and from arrogance cloaked in humility, he informs them, “Why don't you go over to Bethlehem, to that little no place of a town. Maybe you will find the little tike there. If you do, by all means let me know, so I too can go worship him.” And the rest is history. They went. They saw. Then after presenting their gifts an angel warned them not to return to Jerusalem. And we readers know that they are people living in the type expectancy that **looked hither and there for where God was active in their world.** They were sojourners who made note of what angels told them in their dreams.

Expectancy! What do we look forward to happening in the future? Do we expect the Messiah of Isaiah or Micah, the one who will make us great again or the one who will bring us peace? Or do we live in expectation of the One who will take us way past a cleaning up salvation (forgiveness) to an awakening born of fire and the Holy Spirit—something beyond us calling, a tug we have waited for all our lives—a tug to move from under the reputations we have built for ourselves, the high expectations and disappointing returns—to a greatness that surpasses Isaiah’s and a peace beyond our imagination.

This is the promise. We’ve only to live with confidence that what has promised will happen. All the time looking **hither and there for where God is active in our world—always ready to embrace the epiphanies, the awakening, and the sudden intuitive leaps of understanding.** Amen.

10, 2010

Epiphany Sunday

Communion

Chris, Where you here last year when we did this service, or do I need to go over with what we usually do here.

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Theme: An attempt to mingle the Epiphany story of Wednesday with the lectionary for this Sunday. I hear the hoof beats of the camels on the sand and a man standing in the desert shouting “Prepare you the way of the Lord.” I sometimes think the gospel writers are not as different in what they have to say, as in how they say it.

An awakening, something beyond them was calling, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives – a tug to move out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns.

The great wisdoms of this world cannot prevail unless the minds and hearts of people are reaching out to welcome them in.

Living in expectation verses being totally blind sighted

Title: Awakenings”