

“Listening to the Man: Expectation and Confirmation”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Our first text for today comes from the 43rd chapter of the Book of the prophet Isaiah. This portion of Isaiah was probably written sometime after the events of 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and many of its residents who were not killed were taken into exile. This was the second deportation, the first having happened in 597 B.C. Isaiah sees these terrible events as part of God’s judgment. Isaiah and the other prophets had warned that there would be harsh consequences to the nation and its people for worshipping idols and failing to treat the poor and vulnerable and society with justice and mercy. The tragic events the prophets had predicted had come to pass. Now the prophet’s task is different. He is faced with having to encourage a people who had become dispirited. So the author of this portion of Isaiah turns his poetic gifts toward doing just that. He comforts them, reminding them that they are still precious in God’s eyes, letting them know that God will not abandon them no matter what trials and tribulations they face, and that they will be restored. Listen for God’s word in the book of Isaiah. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our second lesson for today comes from the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The story is set nearly 600 years after the end of the Babylonian exile, and about thirty years after the birth of Jesus. Crowds of people have been coming out to the Judean wilderness to be baptized by a man named John. John had been crying out in the wilderness that it was time to prepare the way for the Lord and that the people needed to be ritually washed for the forgiveness of their sins. Many came and when they did, John yelled at them, challenging them to bear fruit worthy of repentance, to show by the way they lived that they had turned to God and made God’s priorities their own. And he wasn’t very nice about it. In Matthew’s gospel he directs his ire to the scribes and Pharisees, but in Luke’s gospel, he calls all of the people “a brood of vipers.”

To properly understand the sense of longing that brought the people out to the wilderness, and caused them to be attracted to John’s message, you should know that despite Isaiah’s words of comfort some 600 years before, generation after generation of the people had lived largely under the yoke of foreign rule (with a few brief exceptions). So they were looking for a Messiah, a deliverer. Listen now for what John says about the One whose way he is preparing - and pay attention to what Jesus does, and what happens when he does it. *Read Luke here.*

The text I just read from Luke begins with expectation and ends with a confirmation. In that respect, it seems like a perfect passage for us to reflect upon on this Sunday, as we launch our confirmation process in earnest by presenting members of this class with Bibles and commissioning their faith mentors.

Actually, the official kick-off was Friday evening, with dinner, discussion and a lock-in. The kids gathered in the Meeting House for a meal and some ice-breakers with Jim, Dan, and me, while their

parents, some of their mentors, and some Session members had their own meal back there in Fellowship Hall. Then we all came together for a couple of hours to talk about baptism, about how our confirmation process is a chance for the young people who were baptized as infants to affirm for themselves the vows that were made on their behalf when they were babies, and about how for those who have not yet been baptized, it is an opportunity to take that step for themselves at a time when they can remember it. At the close of that large group event, all but the bravest adults went home and the confirmands spent the night. (I have to confess that this was the first year I didn't spend the night. I didn't even take part in the ice cream eating contest - which I typically win - but I'll be back next year, so I'm coming for you, Jim Stover!)

The air Friday evening was charged with expectation. This year, for the first time, the kids signed covenants, promising that they would invest themselves fully in the process - and their parents, mentors, and pastor signed or will sign that covenant, too. Of our confirmands, we expect that they come to class whenever they possibly can, make up work that they missed, and that they come to worship and do the reading assignments. They, in turn, can expect from the leadership team, the mentors, and this larger congregation well-prepared lessons, support, encouragement, and our active involvement.

Before the large group part of the evening was through, a number of the adults shared their expectations. One said that she hoped the confirmands would find in the group the freedom to be themselves - to not try to be somebody different than they are, to feel free to have their own questions and doubts and to know that these will be respected. Another said that she hoped that the confirmands wouldn't go through the process and then disappear, that they would be meaningfully involved here at Immanuel as long as they were in the area. Still another said she hoped the confirmands would feel integrated into the life of the whole congregation the adults as well as the youth.

Expectations. We all have them, and not just associated with the confirmation process. We have expectations of life and the people with whom we share it. We have expectations of ourselves. We have expectations placed on us by others - parents, spouses, children, friends, teachers, employers, and yes, the God we know in Jesus Christ. Some of these expectations include such things as, "Do your best, eat your vegetables, learn the material, tuck me in, be there when I'm hurting, do it right, love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." *Expectations....*

After the people came out to see and hear John the Baptist, Luke says that they "were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts whether he might be the Messiah." This week I've been pondering what it was about John that would have created in them such a sense of expectation. I mean, he wasn't a particularly winsome fellow, just a scraggly street corner preacher out there in the desert wearing a loin cloth and feeding himself with insects and honey, and he was yelling at them, to boot. What was it that caused the crowds to be so expectant, so full of hope, when they heard him?

Do you know what I think it was? I think they were filled with hope and expectation because John expected something of them. He hadn't given up hope for them. He hadn't written them off. On top of that, he reminded them that God expected something of them, too.

If you've read or listened to *The Last Lecture*¹ the address Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie-Mellon, gave just a few months before he died of cancer, you may remember how he talked about what he learned from playing football. One time, when he felt like the coach was riding him pretty hard, he complained to another adult. This wise person, could have been a faith mentor, told him that if the coach was yelling at him to do it better, that was a lot better than the coach just ignoring him when he was doing it wrong. Because if the coach was just ignoring him when he was doing it wrong, he would have just been writing him off. So picture John with a ball cap on out there, exhorting the troops and actually expecting something of them.

As long as the expectations aren't utterly unreasonable, (and sometimes even when they are), most people, I believe, like to be challenged. It's what drives some of us to make New Year's resolutions every year. We know that if the bar never gets raised, we can't move to new heights. And when the bar does get raised, more often than you might expect, people clear it. More than one study has shown that when children who don't have the test scores to get into Gifted and Talented programs are placed in them anyway, a good percentage of them wind up doing as well as the rest of the class, because their teachers and their peers expect them to succeed.

Whoever first talked about the "soft tyranny of low expectations" was right. For teachers, parents, spouses, friends, employers, for the God we know in Jesus Christ not to expect anything of us is tantamount to neglect - it is simply not caring.

John is out there in the wilderness because he cares, and he wants to turn the people's hearts back to God. But when they try to say that he is the Messiah, he is quick to point to the One whom he will baptize, the one John knows will bring out the best in them, the One whose Spirit will separate the wheat from the chaff, what is worth saving from what should be discarded, what is lasting from what is temporal, in their lives. When John talks about Jesus with a winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff, which will be burned with unquenchable fire, I choose to believe he is not talking about sorting out the good people from the bad people, the ones who will go to a good place from those who will go to a bad place, the saved people from the damned people. He is rather saying that the constant challenge of embodied and embodying love helps us discern what is compassionate, and merciful and just, and that when we pay attention to that Spirit, we know what wheat is worth saving and what is chaff that blows away with the wind. John knew there was someone coming who could bring out the best in them, who could separate the wheat from the chaff in their lives.

Near the close of last week's sermon, I said that we needed to let the baby Jesus grow into a man, and that we needed to listen to the man. In this week's text, we don't actually hear him say anything. But oftentimes actions speak louder than words. So I encouraged you as I read the text for today to watch what Jesus does there.

What Jesus does after he is baptized is to pray, and he prays expectantly. I'd hazard a guess that most of us don't always pray expectantly. Sometimes we just mouth the words without thinking about them, whether they are the words to the Lord's Prayer or the words I have carefully crafted for the bulletin. But here Jesus is praying expectantly, and when he does, the heavens open and he hears a voice. Notice what the voice says. The voice doesn't say that he will avoid all hardship, all trials and

tribulations. It doesn't say that he will live happily ever after. The voice from God simply says, "You are my child, the beloved. I am pleased with you." That's the confirming voice he hears that empowers him to carry out his ministry on earth. And that's the confirmation we receive, too.

This is one of the reasons I love to have communion by method intinction because people come forward and Dan and I get to call you by name. This is Christ's body, given for you. At least once or twice every time we do that, I blank on a name (sometimes it's the name of someone I know very well), and it always makes me feel terrible, because I like that personal touch, it reminds us that God calls each of us by name. We are not just a number.

The other night we did an exercise in our groups. Each group had a bowl of water, and at a certain point we passed the bowl around, each person dipped his or her finger in the water to remind them of their baptism, and then were addressed personally. One of the highlights of this weekend was to have someone extend the bowl to me, to hear them say, "Aaron, you are a child of God." To hear such words is no assurance that life will always be easy, but it does remind me that I will always be precious in God's sight.

Here is one last bit of Good News. If you find that you don't live up to the expectations, remember that God doesn't love you any less. Grace gives us a different motivation for living up to God's expectations. We don't have to live up to them because we fear God won't love us if we don't, we seek to live up to them because we know that we are still beloved, still precious to God even if we fail. And that sort of grace is the best motivation of all.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ For a free transcript of Pauch's last lecture at Carnegie-Mellon, you can go to <http://download.srv.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch/Randy/pauschlastlecturetranscript.pdf>. The portion about the football coach is on page 5 of the transcript. It is also available in book form and you can find it on YouTube.