

Matthew 3:1-12
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 FBC Vancouver
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“Christmas Expectations”

What are you expecting this Christmas? Christmas is a time of huge expectation. This means, of course, that if our expectations are not grounded in reality, Christmas can also be a time of huge disappointment, a time of broken expectations.

I think it was the Christmas I was in grade seven. My brother and I had discovered where my mother had hidden the presents we were going to open on Christmas morning. So we decided (or I did, anyway) to sneak into the closet, and carefully unwrap the presents just enough to see what we were getting. We discovered a Chemistry set, and a building set – one of those kits with miniature steel girders, nuts and bolts, and pulleys and electric motors. I was sure the building set was for me and the Chemistry set was for my brother. He, thankfully, agreed.

I could hardly wait for Christmas morning to come! For weeks I dreamed of all the cool structures I could design and assemble. When the morning came, my dad handed me my gift. I unwrapped it ... and it was the Chemistry set! He then handed my brother his gift. He unwrapped it ... and it was the building set! I would like to say I never again sneaked a peak. But I can say that I never again made the mistake of getting ahead of my dreaming.

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas,
 Just like the ones I used to know.
 Where the tree-tops glisten and children listen
 To hear sleigh bells in the snow.”

“I’ll be home for Christmas.
 You can count on me.
 Please have snow and mistletoe
 And presents on the tree.
 I’ll be home for Christmas
 If only in my dreams.”

What are your expectations this Christmas?

It all depends, of course, on what you think Christmas is all about.

Christmas. Christ-mas. The celebration of Christ. As you know, Christ is the English of the word *Christos*, Greek for the Hebrew, Messiah. Christ-mas. Messiah-mas. The celebration of Jesus the Messiah. The celebration of Jesus the Christ.

So, the question is, what are you expecting of Christ this Christmas? It is all about Him. So, what are you expecting of Messiah?

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, had huge expectations of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. I mean, really huge expectations! John the Baptist could sense that there was “something cataclysmic in the air.” And he had good reasons for his sense. He and his cousin, Jesus, had been born in unusual ways. John had been born to parents who were well beyond the child-bearing years. And Jesus had been born to a young girl who at the time of conception and birth was a virgin. What could all this mean?

John’s father, Zachariah, was a priest. And from John’s birth he was set aside to also be a priest. His formative years were spent preparing for his priestly work. But somewhere along the line, he felt constrained to leave that assumed calling, and go to live in the wilderness, in the solitude of the desert. How long we lived out there, we do not know. What we do know is that in the solitude that the lonely place affords, John brooded, prayed, read, listened. He especially listened.

Had his father told him what was said about John before he was conceived?

“He will be great in the sight of the Lord,
and he will drink no wine or liquor;
and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb.
And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.
And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah ...
so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” [Luke 1:15-17]

Had John’s mother told him what was said of his cousin Jesus before He was conceived?

“He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High;
and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;
and He will reign over the house of David forever;
and His kingdom will have no end.” [Luke 1:32-33]

Had John’s mother told him of that day when Jesus’ mother came to visit, and in Elizabeth’s womb John the unborn leapt for joy? [Luke 1:45]

For hundreds of years God had spoken to His people through the Prophets. But by the time John came on the scene God had not spoken for over 300 years. There had been no prophetic word for over 300 years. Why the silence? And why now the flood of words about a King and a kingdom which will have no end?

Out in the desert, John could listen to his thoughts, and more importantly, listen to the “still small voice” of the Living God. Out in the desert, he came to understand that something cataclysmic was about to happen. The Christ was coming. Messiah was coming. And He turned out to be John’s cousin, Jesus of Nazareth.

In the text we read, in Matthew 3:1-12, we see and hear John the Baptist’s Christmas expectations. We see and hear John’s expectations of the Christ of Christmas.

First, John expects in Jesus to meet God. "He who is coming after me is mightier than I" (3:11). Mightier because He Who comes after John is God!

God? Yes, God.

John sees himself as a "voice." The "voice" spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah. Quoting Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord ..'" (3:3). The way of the Lord. The way of Yahweh. Isaiah foresees someone crying out to prepare the way for Yahweh. So later in the text quoted by Matthew, Isaiah says,

"Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news,
lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (40:9).

John expects in Jesus to meet God!

Somehow he came to the conviction that although Jesus was born a few months after him, his cousin had actually existed before him (John 1:30). Somehow John came to recognize in the coming of his cousin the coming of One who has always existed. No wonder he speaks of not being worthy to even stoop down and untie the Coming-one's sandals. No wonder he spends his entire adult life pointing others toward the Coming One. No wonder he would later say, when told of the growing popularity of his cousin, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). John gladly faded out of the lime-light so that people would clearly see the Main Actor on the stage. "Make ready the way of the Lord." The Lord! Yahweh! God!

John expects in Jesus to meet God. And he was not disappointed. Although he did not know how this would take place, and although he did not live to see how it all unfolded, John did meet God in his cousin.

This is the fundamental declaration of the Christmas gospel. God has come to earth. God has become one of us, and entered our world in flesh and blood. John the Apostle put it this way:

"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God [toward God],
and the Word was God.
All things came into being through Him. ...
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

"God who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,'
is the One who has shone in our hearts
to give us the knowledge of the glory of God
in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

In Christ, "all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

But it is Jesus himself who puts it more startlingly:

“He who seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“He who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me” (John 12:45).

“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM” (John 8:28).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58).

John expects in the Christ of Christmas to meet God. John would love to sing with Charles Wesley:

“Christ by highest heaven adored;
 Christ the everlasting Lord!
 Late in time behold Him come,
 offspring of the virgin’s womb.
 Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
 Hail th’ incarnate Deity,
 Pleased as man with us to dwell,
 Jesus, our Immanuel.”

“Prepare the way for the Lord ... for God!”

So, John’s second Christmas expectation: John expects in Jesus to see the coming of the Kingdom of God. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2). Somehow John came to the conviction that in and because of his cousin a whole new order of existence was breaking into the world – God’s world order. Somehow John came to the conviction that in and because of Jesus, a great threshold was being crossed, and that what the Prophets longer for was finally going to happen.

God’s reign of light would now dawn in the darkness. God’s reign of love would now melt hostility and hatred. God’s reign of life would now overcome death. Healing would now take place. Justice would now be done. “Repent, turn around, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

And although things did not happen in exactly the way John had hoped – Jesus did not move fast enough in John’s mind, and there was not enough swinging of the axe – John did see the kingdom coming. He heard Jesus Himself declare, “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near.” He saw Jesus healing people of all kinds of diseases and pains. He saw Jesus freeing people from the grip of the demonic. He saw Jesus reconciling those the world keeps apart. He saw that indeed the future was spilling over into the present. Heaven was invading earth.

Had John been allowed to live longer he would have seen how the kingdom has spread throughout the whole world. His huge expectation, though not fulfilled exactly the way he envisioned – and we will grapple with this next Sunday – was being realized.

God was finally bringing to earth that for which the Prophets before John had longed. Creation was being restored. Humanity was being liberated from the powers of sin, evil and death. The King was coming!

So, John could also sing with Isaac Watts:

“Joy to the world!
 The Lord is come:
 Let earth receive her King. ...
 No more let sins and sorrow grow,
 Nor thorns infest the ground;
 He comes to make His blessings flow
 Far as the curse is found.” [1719, based on Psalm 98].

Which brings us to John’s third Christmas expectation, the inherent implication of his other two expectations: John expects in Jesus to be baptized. John the Baptist expects to be baptized by Jesus the Baptizer. “As for me, I baptize you in and with water, but He Who is coming after me is mightier than I, ... and He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11).

The Lord Who comes into the world at Christmas, Who brings and bears the New World Order, comes to baptize. Yes, He comes to forgive. As John would later say of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29,36). And yes, He comes to reveal. As John would later say of Jesus, “This is the Son of God” (John 1:34), who because He has always existed in the bosom of the Father, can reveal the Father. But what gripped John out in the desert is that the Coming One, the Messiah, comes to baptize. “I baptize you in and with water ... but He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

There are good reasons for John to come to this expectation. Throughout the years that God spoke through the Prophets before John, God describes what is to come using the words water, Spirit, and fire. Listen to how God put it. Listen to texts John was listening to in the desert.

Through the Prophet Ezekiel God says:

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you,
 and you shall be cleansed from all your uncleanness,
 and from all your idols I will cleanse you.
 A new heart I will give you,
 and a new spirit I will put within you ...
 I will put My Spirit within you,
 and cause you to walk in My statutes” (36:25-27).

“I will put My Spirit within you and you shall live” (37:14).

“I will not hide My face any more from them;
 when I pour out My Spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord” (39:29).

Through the Prophet Isaiah God says:

“For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
 and streams on the dry ground;

I will pour My Spirit upon your descendants,
and My blessing on your offspring" (44:3).

Through the Prophet Joel God says:

"And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh" (2:28).

The Prophet Daniel:

"I kept looking until thrones were set up.
And the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His vesture was like white snow,
And the hair of His head like pure wool.
His throne was ablaze with fire,
Its wheels were a burning fire.
A river of fire was flowing and coming out before Him ..." (7:9-10)

Through the Prophet Malachi God says:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger,
and He will clear the way before Me.
And the Lord Whom you seek,
will suddenly come to His temple ...
But who can endure the day of His coming?
who can stand when He appears?
For He is like a refiner's fire" (3:1-2).

As John, out in the desert, soaked in the Prophet's vision of the future, he came to the conviction that it was time for the promises to be fulfilled. And he realized that his baptism was a preparatory rite. But his cousin's baptism was the real thing. "I baptize you in and with water He Who is coming after Me will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire."

That is what John expects of the Christ of Christmas: "The Holy Spirit and fire." What does this refer to? Two different baptisms – first the Spirit and then fire? Or does "and fire" simply expand on "in and with the Holy Spirit"? After all, throughout the Prophets of old, the word "Holy" automatically evoked, among other things, the notion of "purifying fire."

It seems to me that John is saying to be baptized by Jesus in and with the Holy Spirit is to be baptized in and with fire. Again, as Malachi asked, "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire." As the author of Hebrews reminds us, "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the Living God ... for our God is a consuming fire" (10:31; 12:29). John is telling us that the coming of the Holy Spirit is the coming of fire. "I baptize you in and with water, but He Who is coming after me He will baptize you in and with the fiery Holy Spirit."

“Baptize.” A rich word, a wonderful word, dripping with meaning! In both pre-Biblical and Biblical Greek the verb is *baptizdo* which simply means “to immerse.” It was used to describe events such as sinking in mud and plunging beneath the surface of the water. In its passive form – “be baptized” – it meant “to be overwhelmed,” “inundated,” “flooded.” (TDNT).

“In and with.” The text uses only one preposition. Why have I been using two? Because the Greek preposition Matthew uses (*en*) means both “in” and “with.” The word “in” calls attention to that into which we are immersed. The word “with” calls attention to that which overwhelms us when we are immersed.

Do you see what John the Baptist saw after soaking in the Prophets? Just as he immerses repentant people in the Jordan River, so Jesus comes and immerses repentant people in the fiery Holy Spirit. Just as those who went down into the Jordan River were thus overwhelmed with water, so those whom Jesus baptizes are overwhelmed with the fiery Spirit of God. Or as I have put it at other times: Jesus Christ, the Messiah, comes into the world to dunk human beings into and drench human beings with the very Life of the Living and Holy God!

Theologians have a special term for this reality. It is the word “effusion,” regularly used in conjunction with the words, “creation” and “incarnation.” All three are the work of the Triune God. The work of creation mostly associated with God the Father. The work of incarnation mostly associated with God the Son. The work of effusion mostly associated with God the Spirit.

I like how Reformed theologian J. Rodman Williams expresses it.

“We are dealing in effusion with that activity of the Holy Spirit not possible to adequately describe – wherein He moves in freedom, pervading and filling human reality. This is the coming of God to occupy and possess, to pervade and permeate, to fill and fulfill. It goes beyond creation and incarnation, not as a kind of third on the same plane, but, passing through them, transcending both. Herein God, while remaining transcendent, nonetheless possesses the heights and depths of creaturely existence. It is the filling of human existence with the glory of God.” (In his essay, “*New Theology for a New Era*”).

That is the “something cataclysmic in the air” John the Baptist sensed. “I baptize you in and with water ... but He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The Messiah comes into the world to immerse us in and overwhelm us with His fiery life ... thereby effusing us with the glory of God.

And He does not do this just once. We are ordinarily baptized in and with water once. But not in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. In the gospel of John the Apostle, John the Baptist uses the present tense. “This is the One Who baptizes in and with the Holy Spirit” (1:33). The present tense emphasizes continuous action: “This is the One Who continually baptizes.” It is the nature of the Messiah, the Christ, to baptize and keep on baptizing, to immerse and keep on immersing, to flood and keep on flooding, to invade and keep on invading, to permeate and keep on permeating, to overwhelm and keep on overwhelming. Not once. Not twice. Not three times. But again and again.

Makes sense ... given Who Jesus is ... how wondrously full He is. How can He give us all He wants to give us just one time? And makes sense ... given who we are ... how finite we are. We do not yet have the capacity to take in all He wants to give us just one time. So He keep on effusing us with His glory, until every millimeter of our being radiates with the purity of His Life.

I wonder how John handles all he saw out in the desert? "I baptize you in and with water. But He Who is now arriving on the scene is going to baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire."

And every time He does, there is a deep cleansing. He moves through our being, burning away whatever is keeping us from knowing God and from living in His Kingdom. And every time He does, says William Barclay, there enters into our fatigue and hopelessness, "a surge of new life" (*Matthew*, vol. I, 49). And we are freshly enabled "to do the undoable, to face the unfaceable, and to bear the unbearable" (*ibid*).

As I have been living with John the Baptist the past weeks, my mind kept going to how C.S. Lewis illustrates the expectations of meeting Jesus the Christ. In the first book of his *Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund, Susan, Lucy, and Peter, the children who have entered Narnia, hear about the wonderful person called Aslan. He is the Christ-figure in the stories. They are at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who like the other animals in the story can talk. Mr. Beaver is telling the children about what will happen when Aslan comes to Narnia which at that time was under the spell of the evil witch. Aslan "will put all to rights" says Mr. beaver; "as it says in an old rhyme in these parts:

'Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its Death
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again'.

You'll understand when you see him."

Then we read

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr. Beaver.

"Is – is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 75-76)

So, what are your expectations this Christmas? After spending time with the forerunner of Jesus Christ, and seeing what he saw as God peeled back the wrapping on the presents to give him a peak at what was to come, I cannot help but have John's expectations.

I expect to meet God, to know Him more fully than I did last Christmas.

I expect to see more signs of the Kingdom of God, to watch more of His reign of light and love break into my world and your world.

I expect to get further dunked and further drenched, to be cleansed by holy fire, to be filled with holy life.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

"The kingdom of heaven has come near."

"And He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire."