

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 13, 2019 (Baptism of Our Lord, Year C)*

“Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.” You may recognize these words as the first verse of an Advent hymn. It was written in 1744 by the prolific English hymn writer Charles Wesley and has been sung in the days leading up to Christmas for hundreds of years. We sang it here at St. John’s on the First Sunday of Advent, so just about six weeks ago.

Now, I know Advent is in the rear view mirror at this point. And so is Christmas for that matter. So it feels a bit out of order to speak of expectation — a theme we addressed throughout Advent — *after* the birth of Jesus. Our expectations have been fulfilled! It’s time to move on.

But this theme of expectation is strong along the banks of the Jordan River. The crowds had gathered in anticipation of their long expected Messiah. And we hear in Luke’s gospel that, “the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.” With the arrival of John, there was a glimmer of hope; that the one who was born to set his people free and release them from their fears and sins, this Messiah, had finally arrived.

He hadn’t, of course. Not quite yet, anyway. John tamps down those expectations that had the crowd all abuzz, by pointing the people away from himself and towards the one who was to come. The one who wouldn’t simply baptize with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. That’s the role of the Forerunner; to proclaim the imminent arrival of the Messiah; to set expectations.

And one of the ways John does this is to shake up people’s expectations of what the Messiah would look like. The Messiah would not be made in the people’s image, but in God’s image. The Messiah would not conform to the people’s hopes and desires, but to God’s purposes. You don’t get to make your own Messiah, one that suits your own model or fits neatly into your own messianic box; you submit to the divine understanding of what it means to be a Savior.

So while many in the crowd hoped the Messiah would set their people free from the tyranny of Roman oppression, this Messiah was more concerned with setting people free from their “fears and sins,” as Wesley writes in his hymn. John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as a way of preparing people for the arrival of Jesus. And this focus on repentance may have confused the crowds. It was the Romans who were in need of repentance! The oppressors needed to repent, not the oppressed! But, again, the expectations are being reset and reordered in real time.

It’s important to remember that repentance is not just about looking backward, a way of dwelling on the sins of the past. Rather, repentance looks forward, it envisions a new way of life. It involves a turning toward the future, a future dripping with hope and possibility and expectation and new life. And in this way, repentance is the perfect complement to the notion of expectation that held the crowd at such a fevered pitch. They both anticipate a realm where freedom from fear and sin is not just theoretical, but realized in relationship with God.

We are baptized into this hope, the hope of the Messiah whose birth we welcomed at Christmas; the hope of a new realm brought about by the arrival Jesus, but also brought about through our individual repentance along with a turning towards a future in which God rules our hearts. That's the sense of expectation that John the Baptist invited the crowds into; the same sense of expectation with which we will, in a few moments, renew our own baptismal covenants; the same sense of expectation into which we baptize three children this morning.

Last week at our Confirmation Class, we looked at this passage about Jesus' baptism. We often start with a brief Bible study. But before we did, I had everyone write down one negative word someone had said about them. An insult or a name they had been called. One that hurt or caused them shame or embarrassment. If you've spent any time on this earth, it's not hard to come up with one. You can think back to the playground or middle school or recall a family member or former friend who blurted something out in the midst of an argument. It may be something said to your face or something you heard second hand or something someone wrote about you online. But I invite you to think of one right now. There's no need to write it down, you can just hold it in your mind.

I then told them I wanted to focus on one particular word in this passage: the word "beloved." A word that means "one who is loved" but can also be translated as "worthy of love." We see it here in the voice of God that comes down from heaven after Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism saying, "You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

God says this to Jesus but he also says it to each one of you. You are God's beloved daughter; you are God's beloved son. With you, God is well pleased. It is so easy to forget this fact. Or to deny it. Or to feel that you are unworthy of God's love.

There are so many negative messages out there; on social media, in advertising, even New Year's Resolutions, which are generally a good thing, but the underlying assumption in making them is that you aren't good enough just as you are. That you are inherently flawed. Yes, from a theological perspective, this is true. We are all sinners; we are all in need of repentance, the same repentance preached by John the Baptist. But we are also made in God's image, worthy of God's love, the God who abounds in grace and forgiveness.

Even though we are called upon to repent, to turn away from that which separates us from God, we are nonetheless beloved by God. This is perhaps a deep paradox of faith, counterintuitive on the surface of things; that we are beloved despite our imperfections. That even as we turn away from God, God leans in to love us even more deeply.

When we were done, I asked the Confirmands to take the card on which they had written, cross out the negative word, and write instead "beloved" across it. Because that's what you are in God's sight. Beloved. Worthy of God's love. And I don't want you to ever forget that.

In the second verse of Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, Wesley writes, "Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. And that's what stands at the center of our expectation: Jesus is indeed the "joy of every longing heart."