

Church on the Mall  
December 13, 2015  
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Luke 3:7-18

“Filled with Expectation: Wanting”

The middle of December often greets me with a surprising sense of sadness.

Surprising because as a pastor I love the season of Advent – the busyness of the church, the preparations for our Christmas celebration. I love the special Saturday retreats and church Christmas parties, the decorations, the increased desire of all of us to be tending to our spiritual lives as we prepare for Jesus’ birth. This is church at its best and I cherish this time together as a congregation. But, mid-December also has its marks of tragedy that my soul can’t seem to ignore, with today’s date in particular straddling two significant events.

Nine years ago yesterday, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Springfield Township High School, the school in the community where I was serving as an Associate Pastor, came to school with an AK-47, wandered around the school after firing shots into the air, before shooting himself in front of the library. My terrified students were in lockdown for an hour as he paced the halls with the gun. Not only did they fear for their lives, but the student who killed himself in this violent, public, threatening way was their friend: an Eagle Scout who came from a well-known family in the community; the kid who they sat beside in science class.

Tomorrow marks three years since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, when 20 elementary students and 6 staff members were violently killed by the automatic rifle of a shooter who stormed the building with a barrage of bullets, later killing himself. My son was in second grade at that time and I remember visiting his class for a Christmas party that following week, looking through the halls and classrooms with a sense of dread, imagining the horrible scene in Sandy Hook, and feeling sick to my stomach.

This year's tragedies are further from home, but just as horrible none-the-less – the terrorist attack in Paris, France that killed 130 people; the shooting rampage in San Bernardino, CA that left more than a dozen people dead and even more wounded.

This time of year when we are gearing up for holidays full of joyful family reunions and Christmas cheer, perhaps our biggest hope is being able to suspend real life if just for a moment, and imagine that everything is right with the world. That's what the Christmas cards tell us to do. That's what the movies we watch and the traditions we keep can lead us to do. Let's, just for a moment, around this Christmas time, imagine that everything is right with the world – when our kids are home, cookies are baking in the oven, and the Christmas tree lights twinkle with their magic. But the reality of the world prevents us from doing that. Because it's not. Everything is not right with the world. Not even for a moment. And while our Hallmark culture around us may steer us towards this false fuzzy feeling of nostalgia and sentimentalism this

time of year, our newspaper headlines – the reality of the world around us – points us in a different direction.

Last week John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness to prepare us for Jesus' coming, telling us all to repent – which means to turn away from that which separates us from God and towards that which unites us with God. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, this and every Advent season we purposefully repent – we turn away from the superficiality and commercialization of this season and towards the deep meaning of the incarnation that comes in the midst of a world that is broken and despairing.

This year as we follow the lectionary readings, I keep waiting for the good stuff; the warm feelings – the angels and shepherds, Gabriel visiting Mary, Joseph wrestling with the news of this pregnancy. But instead we are forced to stay with reality and remember a world that is longing for guidance, for salvation, for hope. Our Gospel readings this year don't have the sweet words of angels or the courageous obedience of Jesus' mother Mary. Instead, we have John the Baptist warning us of the wrath to come, emerging from the wilderness telling us to repent and get to work because the Messiah is on his way.

John the Baptist calls us a brood of vipers this morning. We are accused of being poisonous snakes, coming to be baptized without any real intentions of changing our sinful ways. He chastises us for our apathy and laziness, telling us that just because we're already Christians, we are already saved, we have already repented, that doesn't mean we can stand around as if his message doesn't apply to us.

John the Baptist reminds us that our life as usual isn't good enough. Our normal status quo won't cut it. If we fill this time of Advent preparation with sentimental movies, finding the perfect gift, and figuring out how to not gain weight during the holidays, we're not doing enough. John calls us to task, screaming at us that we're a brood of vipers! It's time to change our ways; it's time to see the world as it is and not escape the painful reality of violence and grief and heartache and despair. He tells us to share with those in need and start living our lives being generous and reaching out to others rather than being greedy and thinking of our own wants and desires.

Advent is not the time to escape the real world and imagine just for a moment that everything is alright; this is the time to be in the midst of the world's brokenness and bear witness to the hope that is found in the birth of Jesus Christ. Advent is the time to name the places of deep despair and declare that this is where the Light of the World will be born. Advent is the time to name the real hope of this season that breaks into the world's hardness. Advent is the time to name the false hopes of the world around us that lead us to false expectations and misguided desires.

Karoline Lewis is a contemporary Christian theologian and scholar and she asserts that, "Advent claims God's expectations in the face of the world's false ones." The world's false expectations are that this season will be peaceful and the world will be better off when we buy each other more stuff and that we should focus on ourselves and our capacity to be good gift-buyers. And beyond this specific month of December, the

world's false expectations can lead us away from God's will for our lives and God's desire for his kingdom to come in the world.

Expectations are complicated. They can be prescribed by society or others around us and placed upon us in a way that is suffocating. We are expected to get all A's; we are expected to rise to the top of our field; we are expected to never make mistakes; we are expected to always be happy and go with the flow. Expectations can be formed by a culture that wants us to believe we can and should have it all, and therefore are grounded in a false sense of reality. We expect to make a lot of money. We expect to have a lot of nice things. We expect to have it all together, never be late, and never get sick. Expectations can be equated with hope, and if we are not careful, we are hoping for things and experiences that are dictated by ways of the world instead of our Christian faith and we might not be able to tell the difference between the two.

What are our expectations? Do we expect to be safe? Do we expect to be happy? Do we expect to always be employed? Do we expect to be successful? Do we expect for our children to bury us instead of the other way around? Do we expect to live a long, healthy life? Do we expect life to be fair? Do we expect to always feel loved? Do we expect financial security?

Are these expectations grounded in God's Word and God's promises to us? Or are these expectations prescribed by the world and stimulated by our own selfish desires? We can have expectations of God, because we know God is always faithful to us, and God always follows through on his promises. But we need to be careful not to

dump our expectations upon God that are only rooted in our selfish desires or the ways of the world, and not the promises he makes. We can have expectations about our lives and how God will work within them, but these are often very different than the expectations our culture places upon our lives.

God doesn't promise a world without suffering. God promises to be in the midst of the world's suffering. God doesn't promise that we will always be happy when we live our lives as faithful Christians. God promises the hope of the New Life and second chances when our lives crumble and tragedy strikes. God doesn't promise an end to violence in the Middle East. God promises to bless the peacemakers and to guide them even when that work seems like digging out of a blizzard with a teaspoon. God doesn't promise to protect your life and keep you safe. God promises to make your life meaningful and the risks worth it when you are working to further his kingdom. God doesn't promise to fulfill all your wants and desires. God promises an abundance of mercy, love, and compassion no matter how badly you mess up. God doesn't promise that you won't be sick your first Advent in a new congregation and miss a Sunday morning worship service. God promises to show up at that worship service anyway and bless the congregation with his Word and his presence. Apparently some of my expectations are not grounded in God's Word and God's promises...

John the Baptist's harsh words this morning help us stay rooted in God's Word and God's promises to us. He keeps us from trivializing the Messiah's coming. As privileged Americans, we have the tendency to fence off our lives in such a way that our

personal experience is separate and distinct from the larger world around us. A natural result of that is that our expectations of God's Word and God's promises to us can get distorted and reflect only our limited reality and our limited experience. Our beliefs and our faith can become small and relative only to us, ignoring the realities of the world around us.

When we fence off our world and lead a life of relative privilege, the concept of suffering gets distorted and the pain and injustice of the world shrinks to manageable sizes. When we fence off our world, suffering means health issues, grief, unemployment, anxiety, and depression. When we live in the comfort of freedom; when we don't fear that our government is going to kill us, when we have a relative amount of trust in our justice system, it can be easy to slip into false expectations about God that are not grounded in his Word and his promises. This is where those pithy sayings crop up, like, "God doesn't give you anything you can't handle," or, "Everything happens for a reason." These false expectations might go unnoticed in our privileged experience, because we can handle most of what life throws at us, and we can turn most situations around for our benefit. But that just doesn't translate to the refugee situation in Syria, where people are risking their lives and the lives of their children to be anywhere but there. This just doesn't translate to the homeless man who lives in Center City with untreated mental health issues, no health insurance, a history of being abused as a child, and addiction problems.

I started this morning with some pretty harsh anniversaries. Because this keeps our false expectations of our faith, our life, and who God is at bay. We don't need a Messiah to be born into a world where everything happens for a reason. We don't need a Messiah to be born into a world where God doesn't give you anything you can't handle. We need our Messiah to be born into a world where suffering is real and tragic and not part of God's plan. We need our Messiah to be born into a world where violence is evil and life is no longer sacred. We need our Messiah to be born in a world where governments are torturing and abusing and oppressing its constituents.

Our scripture reading from Luke's Gospel is a wake-up call for us, to remember the actual promises of God and keep the expectations of our lives and of him grounded in these truths instead of being grounded in our experience of privilege. Our imperative is to be aware of the broken world around us and act as instruments of peace, love, and positive change. Our challenge is to repent from the false expectations that actually reinforce the world's injustice and promote our own apathy.

“Advent claims God's expectations in the face of the world's false ones.” John tells us in Luke's Gospel that God's expectations are that we will be about the work of the kingdom – giving away our excess, sharing with our neighbor, uplifting the lowly, and caring for those who are lost and lonely. Without reducing our personal theology to a pithy adage, our task is to be in the middle of the world's brokenness and declare with confidence that God promises not to abandon us in our time of need; that God promises the chance of New Life and redemption and personal transformation even when we've

made huge mistakes; that God promises to show us the way to peace if we are willing to take the steps alongside him. Our task is to reveal God's truth to the world – that all life is sacred, that peace is the worth working toward, that love is more powerful than disdain, that each person on this earth is loved.

The middle of December often greets me with a surprising sense of sadness. It's an Advent sadness that sits right in the middle of the world's pain and violence. It's an Advent sadness that remembers the stinging need of God's light and life to shine in the world's darkest shadows. Especially as our hearts ache with the pain and hurt of the world, we hold fast to the truth of God's redemption that claims each situation as his own and makes his presence known. We hold fast to the promised expectation that God's Messiah will be born anew in the midst of the world's brokenness. This is Good News. Thanks be to God. Amen.