

Preparing for the Unexpected

Pastor Cynthia Lapp

December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72: 1-7, 18-19

Matthew 3:1-12

Romans 15:4-13

This week I was talking with a Prince George's County elementary school teacher. She teaches at one of the lowest performing schools in the county; it hasn't met the educational goals as set by No Child Left Behind for three years running. Despite this, her love for teaching and children is obvious. She sees potential in every child. She says, "The children are sweet and well meaning; they want to do well. But when they have been in the country only a year, are still learning English and their parents are illiterate. How can they be expected to immediately perform at a fifth grade level?"

Because this school isn't meeting expectations there are "educational experts" that come in to help the teacher and her colleagues. But the help feels more like threats. My friend said, "They come in and breathe down our necks, telling us how bad things are, that the school is a mess, that we must do better because soon they will be gone and then we will be all alone."

Her situation somehow reminded me of the passage from Matthew where John the Baptist comes and really lays into people, telling them how they have it all wrong. He wants them to change, but he doesn't give them much help in how to change or hope that change is even possible.

Matthew 3:1-12

At this time, John the Baptizer appeared in the desert of Judea, proclaiming: "Change your hearts and minds for the reign of heaven is about to

break in upon you!” It was John that the prophet Isaiah described when he said, “A herald’s voice cries in the desert: ‘prepare the way of our God, make straight the paths of God.’”

John was clothed in a garment of camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him. John baptized then in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to be baptized, John said to them, “You pack of snakes! Who told you to flee from the coming wrath? Give some evidence that you mean to reform! And don’t pride yourselves on the claim ‘Sarah and Abraham are our parents.’ I tell you, God can raise children for Sarah and Abraham from these very stones!”

“Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I will baptize you in water if you have a change of heart but the One who will follow me is more powerful than I. I am not fit even to untie the sandals of the Coming One! That One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire, whose winnowing fan will clear the threshing floor. The grain will be gathered into the barn but the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire.”

Of course there are differences between the educational gurus in question and John the Baptist. The outside consultants preach from a position of power to struggling teachers and principals, who it might be argued don’t have all that much clout. John admitted to having little power. All he has is his piercing message of repentance and renewal.

John’s preaching is tough on the people who come out in the desert to see him. They have genuine interest in what he is preaching so why is John so hard on these people? In Matthew, John’s harsh words are not for all the desert trekkers; the snakes are the Pharisees and Sadducees.

These curious religious leaders have left their cozy places of study and worship to come to the Jordan River. “What could all the excitement be about? Oh, it is just another prophet in strange clothes, calling for renewed hearts and minds. Not a message we need. We are direct descendents of Abraham and Sarah. Our relationship with God is assured.”

It is precisely this overly confident attitude of the religious leaders that John rails against. As a prophet, John speaks unflinching and harsh words on behalf of God but rarely shows the humility he calls for.

Paul, on the other hand, is one of those Pharisees who did humble himself. Some of us have been hit over the head with writings attributed to Paul so we don't think of him as moderate. But compared to John, Paul takes a gentle approach in relating to those who follow the Way.

In this summary near the end of Romans, Paul is encouraging and inviting, even while reminding the readers that ALL are part of God's people, not just the chosen ones.

Romans 15: 4-13

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; (Ps 18:49) ¹⁰and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; (Deut 32:43) ¹¹and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; (Ps 117:1) ¹²and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; (Is 11:10) in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While it may not sound like it, I think John the Baptist and Paul both have the same thing in mind. They point to the possibility and promise of Isaiah's vision that we heard from the youth and children this morning. They both want all people to be prepared for the coming reign of God. Paul quotes Isaiah 10

explicitly saying that out of this root, (King David's father Jesse,) comes a branch of hope for the whole world, even the gentiles. John's way is to threaten that this Jesse tree will be chopped down if the Pharisees and Sadducees don't repair their ways.

John is speaking to a diverse audience, but his harshest words are for those he views as interlopers. He sees the religious leaders as infiltrators trying to get a read on this new movement. When power is worried it sends out spies. Witness what happened at Fort Benning, Georgia, a few weeks ago.

For 21 years, thousands (including our Jenny Dillon) have gathered for a weekend in November at Fort Benning to protest at the School of the Americas. This school trains military leaders from Latin America in counterinsurgency techniques, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. Known as SOA, its critics call it the "School of Assassins."

Some who protest believe that getting arrested is the best way to have their message heard. This year when a group was arrested it became clear that 26 people were rounded up but only 21 were actually in custody. There had been at least five undercover officers who infiltrated the group to see what was really going on. As with John the Baptist, the leaders of the protests suspected that undercover police were among those participating in the preparatory non-violent training. Like John, they announced their suspicions to the group, though I imagine with less colorful language. (See <http://www.soaw.org/> for more information.)

The infiltrators in John's day were not risking arrest so much as a dunk in the Jordan River. But John refused them baptism, saying he would only baptize them if they truly demonstrated changed hearts.

Paul's approach to the reign of God is less suspicious and more appreciative. He says things like, "Outdo one another in showing respect. Don't repay evil with evil, don't get revenge; bless those who persecute you, rejoice in hope." In our passage today Paul names the positive — in the tradition as well as what he hopes for in the community. He quotes verses from the Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah about unity and praise. He blesses the community. Paul is encouraging; there is no name-calling or threats of unquenchable fire unlike a certain prophet we could name.

This is another one of those times when the lectionary gives us seemingly contradictory messages. Shout loudly and carry a big staff. Or speak kindly and hope for harmony. Is it possible that both paths lead to Isaiah's vision?

The Open Letter group, with which I have been working for three years, recently sent out another letter. After our first letter in early 2009, we were accused of speaking too strongly, of making accusatory statements and being divisive. Perhaps we skewed too close to John the Baptist. We thought we spoke the simple, painful truth, but not everyone appreciated our words or could even hear us for our tone.

The current letter, a Thanksgiving Epistle as we call it, uses a different approach. We look out across Mennonite Church USA and name four situations where we see conferences working hard at disagreeing in love, where we see

people attempting to really listen and talk with each other about the inclusion of LGBT people. (www.openlettertomcusa.org)

This time we are intentional in our imitation of Paul's language and his approach to community building. It remains to be seen how this letter will be received but we are hopeful that we can learn from each other across the church and find unity in the way of Christ.

This advent, with many congregations across Mennonite Church USA, we are using silence to prepare for the unexpected, to pay attention to the unexpected. In the silence, we may expect a harsh word and receive one of comfort. We may long for a tender voice but hear something jolting.

As we enter the silence today, perhaps you have fears or high expectations of what may or may not happen. Know that it is enough to breathe deeply. The holy breath draws us together. It unifies us:

The wolf and the lamb,
the child and the snake,
teachers and consultants,
protestors and spies,
religious leaders, seekers and prophets —
we all have this in common — the holy breath of God in us and through us.

⁵May the God of hope fill you with that breath. May God, the source of strength and encouragement, enable us to live in harmony.