

“How the light gets in.”

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-22

Luke begins by telling us that the people were filled with expectation. Its funny how some little conversations can stick in your memory. When Christine and I were married we had our honeymoon in a northern part of England called the Lake District. The hotel was on the northern most lake of that area called Ullswater. The conversation I remember was as we checked in. The desk clerk knew that we were on our honeymoon, and being a professional in the hospitality business, wanted to get things right for us.

So just as a way of making conversation he asked us about the wedding and our drive north. The question he asked was, “Did everything about this day meet your expectations?” A thousand thoughts swirled around in my head. Expectations?! Just a few months before this, I had no idea in the world that I would be here with my bride. This so far surpassed my expectations that I couldn’t even talk about it in terms of expectations. Expectations, I had no way to respond so I just said politely, “Yes, they did.”

Expectations can have a very potent energy. We all have them and at the same time, just because we have them does not mean that they are easy to talk about. Most of us have expectations for the way we believe that things are supposed to be, and most if not all of us also have expectations for the way things could and should be. Your expectations are not necessarily the same as my expectations.

So when Luke tells us that all the people were filled with expectations there is no reason we should assume that everyone had the same expectations. We do know that their expectations were focused on the ministry of John preaching in the wilderness questioning if it just might be possible that this man preaching and baptizing with such authority might be the one that had been promised, the Messiah. He was certainly charismatic. He was drawing large crowds. His proclamation was a challenge to all who heard it.

The challenge John proclaimed was the need and the willingness to be changed. It was a personal challenge to examine the ethical and moral implications of how we live our lives. Herod was the one in power, and Herod did not like the expectations of this challenge and he threw John in jail.

Before we cluck too much at that, I actually think most if not all of us have a Herod inside of us, and when we get pushed too hard or challenged too much that Herod says, “Enough is enough. We’ll have no more of that.”

Do you know what that voice sounds like in you? The voice that powers up when pushed. It is the voice that reacts when you are afraid. It is the voice that recoils in you when you feel that things are so grossly unfair and you just must set things straight.

There are other voices that we live with as well. Voices that may tell us that we are no good or even that others are no good. There are other voices that many hear as well, voices that insistently keep saying that, “If you want to be loved, if you want to be acceptable, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it.”

But this morning I would like to tell you that the gospel is that there is a life that is more real than all of those voices. The spiritual life is a life in which you gradually, one day at a time, learn to listen to a different way, a deeper more personal voice that is both intimate and universal all at the same time. This voice says, "You are the beloved and on you my favor rests."

That is the voice that Jesus heard at his baptism. Luke tells the story of Jesus baptism a little differently than the other gospels. Luke's perspective gives a humbler, less public version of Jesus baptism. Luke tells us about it in the context of Jesus life of prayer. When Jesus prayed it was not a way of meeting his expectations; his praying was a way for him to listen deeply beyond his thoughts and words.

That voice is for each one of you as well. It is the voice that says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in my mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand, and I hold you safe in the shadow of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to me, and my Holy Spirit makes its home deep within you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that your true identity is **the beloved**. That is who you are."

As we all make our intentions to live into the fullness of that voice the reality is that often the voice seems too still to be heard, too humble to be trusted. We think we need something sturdier or bolder or more secure. We are where we are.

I have been listening to an older poet some these days by the name of Leonard Cohen. One of his songs called "Anthem" puts the challenge and the promise of Epiphany this way:

The birds, they sang at the break of day.

"Start again," I heard them say.

Don't dwell on what has passed away, or what is yet to be.

Yeah, the wars, they will be fought again, the holy dove, she will be caught again, bought and sold and bought again, the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

No matter how many of your expectations have been dashed or bruised, cracked, not met, betrayed, ignored, abused, trampled on, the life of the beloved is still for you, your spiritual DNA does have the capacity to hear and live in the reality of that voice.

I want to offer four words as a way to live the life of the beloved. These four words are very important in the community of the beloved. We use them every time we celebrate the Eucharist together. These four words are a summary of the way Jesus lived the life of the beloved. These are the words. He took. He blessed. He broke. He gave.

First, we are taken. That means that we are chosen by God. We are each seen by God in our preciousness, in our individuality. The world sees being chosen differently. When the world sees one as chosen it assumes that means for all the others, "Too bad for us. We are not chosen." It doesn't work like that

in the beloved community. In the mystery of grace, being chosen doesn't mean excluding anyone. In fact, the more we know we are chosen, the more we listen deeply to that voice calling us 'beloved' the more compassion and generosity we will experience for others. There is no playoff system.

The life of the beloved begins by deeply believing that we are chosen in our uniqueness. One of our children this week had that very precious name. Her name is Unique. I love it. It is a name of grace. You are chosen.

The second word is blessed. Being blessed is an incredible important role for every beloved community. The word benediction means blessing. Literally, bene means good and diction means saying.

Let me give you an example. Yesterday late morning I was down here at church. I had come down to work on the scripture up here in the sanctuary. Our Family Promise families were hanging out mostly with the children playing in the fellowship hall. I stopped over there to say Hi for a minute. One of the mothers was cooking in the kitchen, making shepherd's pie, I believe. Sharon Grobaker was playing cards with some of the children. I was getting ready to leave when one of the mother's asked to speak to me.

She said, "Pastor, I want to tell you something. This morning as we were waking up and getting dressed one of my daughters came over to me and gave me a big hug. We begin every morning by praying. Our prayer is to name at least one thing that we are grateful for. This morning my daughter said, "This church sure has been nice to us letting us stay here." I just wanted you to hear that. " And I wanted you to hear that. All of you that volunteered your time, all of you. That is an example of a blessing. That little girl gives us all a great example of blessing. We all need to be in touch with not only our belovedness but also our blessedness. You need a blessing. There are people that need your blessing.

Then we are broken. We all experience brokenness in our lives. Most of our brokenness has to do with our relationships. We suffer through brokenness when someone couldn't hold on to us or someone hurt us. There is no one here this morning that cannot point to a brokenness in our relationships with our husband, with our wife, with our father, with our mother, with our children, with our friends, with our lovers. Wherever there is love, there is also pain. Wherever there are people who we care for and who care for us there is also the potential of the pain of not being cared for enough. This is no small thing.

So what do we do with our brokenness? As the beloved of God we need to have the courage to embrace it, even to befriend our own brokenness, to resist saying, "Let's just get away from it, sweep it under the rug and pretend that if it is just out of sight then it will all go away and we can get back on track."

No, because we are beloved, we can also have the courage to look at our brokenness, to look at our pain, what gets under our skin because in a very mysterious way our wounds are often a window on the reality of our lives. "Forget your perfect gift. It doesn't exist. There is a crack, a crack in everything. If we can find the courage to embrace our brokenness then we can put them under the blessing. That is when we give permission for the light to come in.

That is the challenge of faith for the beloved, to put our brokenness under the blessing.

There is a great temptation to want to solve other people's problems and tell them to do this or to do that, that if they will just listen to us and do what we say then we can get over this. The main spiritual work we have is to put our brokenness and the brokenness of those we love and those we seek to serve under the blessing.

If we don't, if we put our and their brokenness under the curse, even a little brokenness can lead to a great deal of needless suffering and condemnation and strife. We experience brokenness as an affirmation that we are no good and we just naturally say to ourselves or others, "You see what happened? I lost my job. This friend has fallen out with me. I have been rejected." We hold on to it and use it as proof that we are no good for we always thought so.

The great call is to put our brokenness under the blessing, to live it with as much grace and integrity and gratitude as we can muster because we know that we are beloved.

When in our belovedness we live as those who are chosen, those who are blessed acknowledging that we are also broken, then we can give of ourselves with real joy and abundance. We are chosen, we are blessed, we are broken so that we can give of our true selves.

Or as Leonard Cohen puts it, "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Our Conference has a wonderful camping program for all ages and all abilities, including a camp for adults who are developmentally disabled called Camp Pioneer. The way the Camp works is that counselors are called buddies and each buddy is assigned to two or three campers and all week your assignment as a buddy is to do everything that the campers do with them. I got talked into being a buddy one summer because the couple that organized the camp were members of the church I was serving. I was a little nervous about this but I signed up and, they went a little easy on me and just assigned me to two campers Larry and Paul. I thought we were getting along just fine and after a couple days I was actually beginning to have a good time.

One afternoon we were relaxing between activities and I was sitting in the fellowship hall when one of the other campers came up to me. He said, "Stephen, is this your first time at Camp Pioneer?"

I said that yes it was. He looked at me thoughtfully and asked, "I have been watching you. Tell me, are you a camper or a buddy?"

All I could do was laugh, and by the end of the week, it really didn't make any difference. That is the way it is in the community of the beloved. We are ALL in this together.

Forget about your perfectionistic gift! Ring the bells that still can ring, no matter how cracked they may seem to be. There is a crack, a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in!

It is the light of joy. It is the light of the beloved.
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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