

Hope's Dangerous Sisters, Expectations – Judy Cox

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Call her Abigail. A stubborn little Mennonite mother, she was a force to be reckoned with. Her daughter, Libby, was my close friend. Sadly, Abigail illustrates the difference between hope, and its dangerous sisters expectations, which steal us from the present and push us down the path of disappointment when things don't go our way. Abigail had high hopes for her children: they were to excel academically, play in the orchestra (preferably 1st chair), attend Mennonite colleges, become physicians, and marry equally successful Mennonites—not necessarily in that order. Libby lived up to her mother's hopes, at first, but felt them calcifying into oppressive expectations. As a successful pediatrician, she "finally" did marry, but against Abigail's strenuous objections. Abigail wouldn't welcome this Christian (but not Mennonite!) agri-businessman as a son-in-law—he was "just a farmer." Her expectations, and her refusal to release them, have for 25 years alienated Libby, her husband and her children from Grandma.

Whether we have in-laws, are in-laws, or neither, we all live on that slippery slope between hopes and expectations. Hopes for ourselves and others, hopes for the future—we know how they can calcify into the rigidity of the dangerous sisters, expectations!

We find this tension between hope and expectation in our texts today: John is in prison, in our Matthew passage, struggling with doubt. His expectations for the Messiah, Whose way he prepared, aren't being fulfilled. In contrast Mary, in the alternate reading the lectionary offers, lays down her expectations for the future and sings with hope about who God is, God's ways with and for us.

As we heard in last Sunday's Matthew 3 text, John preached repentance with the image of an ax threatening the root of unfruitful trees. He warned of the Messiah's baptizing with wind and fire as a judgment—wind separating grain from chaff, and fire destroying the chaff. In the 8 intervening chapters, Matthew has shown us a Jesus who teaches love for enemy, and heals the servant of a Roman officer. He calls a tax collector to follow him, and shares table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus...?!? This is NOT separating the wheat from the chaff according to John's expectations!

Here in ch. 11 we learn that John is in prison, hearing what the Messiah is doing. (Later Matthew will explain the back story: John has called out Herod for marrying his sister-in-law against Jewish law, leading to John's imprisonment and eventual death at Herod's command.) So John has been imprisoned by Herod, the hated collaborator with Rome. Jesus, are you going to let this happen to your forerunner?? John, expecting a king or military hero to deliver Israel, surely sees himself vs. Herod as a great place to start! What kind of Messiah doesn't challenge Roman domination of God's people?!? It's no wonder he sends his disciples to ask: Are you the One Who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

N.T. Wright observes: John wants Jesus to bring judgment—and so, in a sense, he will. But already the mercy which comes after judgment, the healing which comes after the time of sorrow, is breaking in, and it's Jesus' job to bring it. This, according to Jesus (and Matthew), is the Messiah's main task—mercy.

Jesus doesn't give a straightforward answer to John's question. He sends John's disciples back to bear witness to what they themselves have heard and seen (and what Matthew's audience has heard in the preceding 6 chapters). Describing his ministry of messianic obedience, demonstrating God's care for the suffering, Jesus evokes one Isaiah passage after another. Some of our Isaiah text today he conflates with bits of chapters 26, 29, & 61. Jesus knows his Isaiah! ...We should notice too, maybe especially, the bits he doesn't include.

Jesus' summarizing conflation begins with verse 5 of our Isaiah 35 passage: the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. (Or, if Handel's Messiah is still ringing in your ears, un-stop-ped!) At least some of Jesus' fellow Jews read Isaiah's vision of messianic salvation with a focus on verse 4, God's coming with vengeance, with terrible recompense. They expect God's purpose to be saving, avenging and vindicating their nation. Not just AN outcome, but THE purpose. Per Luke 4, when Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 more fully in Nazareth, he also selectively omits what his audience sees as the punch line, the day of vengeance of our God. Expectations are the dangerous sisters of hope! Watch out, John! Here Jesus very clearly asserts his authority to reinterpret messianic expectations. Blessed is he who is not offended because of me —or as F.F. Bruce paraphrases: blessed is the one who doesn't feel that I have let her down. What if the bit about vengeance and vindication is our favorite phrase?

Let's face it—many of us Christians look to Jesus' 2nd Advent primarily for rescue, for our own selves. Singing "O come, O come, Emmanuel," we easily insert ourselves, the church, as the captive needing ransom. We too crave OUR vindication more than God's restoration. We critique John, and the people of Israel, for being blocked by their expectations from recognizing the Messiah. This Messiah, who came not for their own vindication, to set their world right just for them, but to set all the world right. Could we recognize him?

Will John take offense? Will we?

Please note too that Jesus does not rebuke John's questioning! Verse 6 is phrased as a blessing, an invitation to Jesus' understanding of messiahship, not as a condemning curse or woe! The lectionary takes us to James 5 this week, too, with its encouragement to patience and endurance in the midst of suffering. Just beyond where our reading cuts off, James adds Job as another example to emulate—Job, who didn't hesitate to ask his questions of God! His example permissions us to ask our questions without fear, knowing that God hears us. (Job didn't get a straightforward answer from God, any more than John did from Jesus—I can't help wondering if we're safer enduring patiently with our honest questions, watching and listening, than when we think we have the answers!)

So if expectations are the dangerous sisters of hope, what might hope look like? Let me quote more fully from Frederic and Mary Brussat's book, Spiritual Literacy: they describe expectation, as steal[ing] us from the present and push[ing] us down the path of disappointment when things don't go our way. They continue: Hope, in contrast, is patient. It is willing to stay with us in the here and now, and it assures us the future is open.

Cue Mary! It was a long 80-mile trip, probably 8 or 9 days, from Nazareth in the boonies to Elizabeth's little town near Jerusalem. Lots of time as the caravan traveled for Mary consider the implications of Gabriel's announcement. Giving up her adolescent dreams of her wedding day would hurt, yes. Giving up expectations for the openness of hope would entail loss of control, vulnerability—it still does! If word got out of her carrying the Messiah, she'd be dead—Herod would kill her. On the other hand, Joseph would know this wasn't his child—and if he wished could call for her death by stoning, according to Jewish law. It takes great courage and trust for Mary to continue to choose hope.

We can speculate about Mary's mental state on the way; we only know that she went. When she greets her relative, Elizabeth bursts out in Spirit-inspired reassurance, a three-fold blessing: Blessed among women are you; blessed the fruit of your womb. Blessed, she who trusted there would be a fulfillment of what the Lord told her!

What a gift Mary receives through Elizabeth. What an invitation to keep on hoping! She hears, and accepts the blessings, the reassuring invitation. Whatever anxieties she might have carried subside in her own tide of joy. But she will not accept Elizabeth's praising of her—she redirects it.

She bears witness to God's action with her:

God Who saves!

God Who regards the overlooked, signifies the insignificant!

God Who acts in holiness—Who is up to something!

She proclaims the ways of this God; and notice how she brackets that proclamation! She begins, and ends, with God's mercy:

God Who scatters the proud and takes down the rulers, Who lifts up the afflicted and lowly.

God Who fills the hungry and sends the callous rich away empty. God Who upends our worlds and overturns our expectations, reversing the order of things.

God Who remembers all God's astonishing promises, and keeps them!

We know nothing of Mary's training in Scripture, except that any would have been very unusual for a woman in her day! At the least, she had paid attention in synagogue; although primarily unique, her words use Old Testament imagery freely. Some allude to and even quote Hannah's Song in 1 Samuel, and the Psalms.

The One Whom she bears knows and will reveal God completely and fully; her words show that she too knows and can bear personal witness to Who God is. We don't know exactly who Mary is, or how Mary felt. Through her praise, we are tutored in Who God is!

Reading Scripture, we start with Who God is—then we come to who we are. And let's face it, you know and I know that we're in this text too—we Americans are the rich, the powerful. But we also know that in God's great mercy the eternal, powerful Word that upholds the universe has become mortal, powerless flesh, "for us and for our salvation." So we can join Mary's song. We can rejoice that God sees the overlooked, raises the lowly, fills the empty—and empties the overfull, humbles the proud, diminishes the powerful. Even that last comes from the mercy of God our Savior!

We wait this season for two Advents. We wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Messiah, who reinterpreted and overturned the expectations of messiahship. We wait in hope for His 2nd Advent, too—which will also upend and overturn our world, maybe against our expectations! Who are we as we wait? Are we John, struggling with our expectations? Can we bring along our questions, but hold those expectations loosely? Can we choose hope, like Mary? Do we believe that it is God's MERCY that upends and overturns our worlds?

And so we come to the Table of the Lord. Week after week, we practice Mary's hope. Let's rehearse for a moment just how prominently God's mercy figures in the words of our sacrament. We too begin and end with God's mercy! In the confession we ask twice over for God to have mercy on us; in the Affirmation of Faith we do the same, after characterizing Almighty God as "our Heavenly Father Who with great mercy has promised forgiveness"; then after the Gloria we affirm that we come to the Table of "our merciful Lord," trusting in God's "great and many mercies!"... for "You, O Lord, are unchanging in your mercy and your nature is love!" Even in the Consecration of the Elements it is our "merciful Father" whom we ask to grant that we partake in Christ's body and blood.

Yes, we wait in hope of God's great mercy. We rehearse every week! And that hope does not, and will not, disappoint us. Thanks be to God!