



"Surprises"

Scripture – Mark 1:1-8

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, December 10, 2023

Scott Black Johnson is the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and a friend of his tells what happened to Scott years ago when Scott and his wife were dating. She was living in the Twin Cities in an apartment complex where most of the other residents were retirees. One day Scott was in her apartment preparing dinner – a pizza. He burned it, and it created so much smoke that it set off the smoke alarm in the apartment. It started screaming.

Burning something in the oven – usually bread – has happened in our house frequently enough that our family lovingly calls it "Camilla bread."

An elderly neighbor heard the sound, and she banged on the door to let Scott know that the smoke alarm was going off – as if he didn't know. Scott opened the door and said to her, "It's just a pizza. There's no fire. I just burned a pizza."

But opening the door let enough smoke out into the hallway to set off the *building* fire alarm. In no time at all, Scott was heading outside into a Minneapolis January with a substantial group of octogenarians. He tried to stop them. "You don't have to leave," he said, "It's just pizza." But they paid him no heed. They were determined to get out of the building.

As they waited for the firefighters to give the all-clear sign, Scott could hear some of them muttering to each other: "Someone said it's just a pizza." At this point, he was pulling his hat down over his face and trying not to be fingered as the incompetent cook.

But here's the thing: if you have ever heard the smoke alarm sound, and you are not sure why it's blaring, you get very clear about your priorities. As Tom Long once said, "The key to the dead bolt is much more valuable than the art on the wall, even if it's a Rembrandt."¹

John the Baptist was like a shrieking smoke alarm. He was a voice blaring: "Repent! Focus on what really matters. Be clear about your priorities."

Now, the word "repent" has become such a heavy religious word that when some hear it, they begin heading for the exit. Many equate it with focusing all of your attention on what's wrong with you, thinking poorly of yourself, and magnifying your shortcomings. Repent means to be highly critical of yourself, right?

No. Repent means the mistakes of yesterday do not define you. You can change. You can head in a new direction.

Chaplain Liz Milner works with inmates in the Santa Clara County jail. She was pondering how Advent is a time of waiting. She says, "Children wait with anticipation for the gifts around the tree, parents wait for their grown children to come home for the holidays, hardworking teachers wait eagerly for the winter break...and inmates in the county jail wait...for what? When the trimmings are stripped away from Christmas, what do we find worth waiting for?"²

As you know, waiting is a major theme of Advent, but we miss the mark if we imagine waiting to be a purely passive stance. You can do nothing and simply wait for things to change. However, waiting can also be anticipatory and preparing for action.

Chaplain Milner asked some of the inmates to reflect on what they are waiting for while they serve their sentence. It prompted sober reflection and sincere soul-searching.

One inmate wrote: "I am waiting for life to begin. I am waiting for a new plan...I am waiting for the rain to pass...I am waiting to be free. I am waiting for my own words. I am waiting for my own tears. I am waiting for my laughter."

Another inmate wrote: "I am waiting for hope to shed some light. I am waiting for God to stop saying, "Not yet." I am waiting for the light to get a little brighter...I am waiting for my chance to show God I'm ready."

These men and women in prison are waiting for a new day. Yet even in their limited freedom to act, they are not simply waiting passively for things to change. You can hear in their voices that they are envisioning a different life, a changed life, a better life. They are not merely in a holding pattern. They wait in a way that is transforming.

A good friend who spent a few years in prison did not waste his time passively waiting for the days to pass. He tutored others and helped them earn their GED so that when they left prison they would be ready for a new life.

Advent spurs us to name some of our deepest desires: hope, joy, love, and peace. Instead of simply learning to tolerate our world as it is, the Scriptures urge us to risk dreaming dreams of a different world, a far better world.

Today's passage tells of John the Baptist as a grown man when he called for people to repent as a way of preparing for the coming of Christ. But if we flip over a few pages to the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we dial back to the moment when John was only eight days old. His father, Zechariah, holds his son in his arms and breaks into song. The final words of his song are: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high (meaning Jesus) will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Zechariah envisions better days ahead. However, he does not declare that Jesus will unilaterally establish a reign of peace. He says that Jesus will guide *our* feet into the way of peace. He will show *us* the path that leads to shalom.

Peace. Really? In this fractious and divided world, is hoping for peace a fantasy? Is cynicism a better bet?

Many of you know the name Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, poet, philosopher, and environmental activist. Berry is "an opponent of all attempts to predict the future...Why? Don't we depend upon predictions of the future? Who would know whether to take an umbrella to work? How would we decide which car to buy without consumer magazines predicting the reliability of the cars? How would economists do their work without predicting the markets?"

For Berry, though, since we cannot really know the future, shrouded as it is in mystery, all predictions are merely projections cantilevered from the past, guesses cast forward from what we already know and have experienced. What is more, the motives underlying predictions are suspect (because they are often based on the desire) to eliminate all unpredictability and surprise."³

However, God does unexpected things. Sometimes when life is dark, something unexpected happens that totally changes the dynamics. A divorce seemingly destroys a person's life, but eventually leads to greater happiness. The captain of a slave ship – John Newton – became one of the greatest advocates of abolishing slavery. Mortal enemies in World War II – Great Britain and Germany – became allies. Currently the war in Gaza screams only death and destruction. The current situation appears hopeless. As followers of Jesus, we dare not give up. We are called to be peacemakers.

Israeli Jew, Dan Almagor writes:

For some people a Palestinian is Yasir Arafat,
A youth throwing a Molotov cocktail at a bus,
A boy hurling taunts at soldiers and cursing their mothers.
When you say "Palestinian" to me, I think of Walid.
The only Palestinian I know and who knows me,
And with whom I converse (in my language, of course).
He is thirty or so, married with children,
Has a pleasant smile and speaks passable Hebrew.
An intelligent fellow, with a degree in accounting
Who reads for pleasure classical Arab poetry,

Philosophy and religious works.
He has a good sense of humor and he's an optimist.
I wish I had more friends like him.
He uses his education in our local supermarket,
Weighing vegetables and making home deliveries.
In his spare time, he washes cars or cleans apartments
In our neighborhood, as many hours as possible.
He has a family to keep, and he may not be able to come tomorrow.
There might be a curfew
Or he might find himself "inside" like his brother
Six months administrative detention without trial.
Every day he has a story to tell.
Minor incidents, not what you would call atrocities.
His identity card was torn up by a reserve soldier
For no particular reason.
Trucks turned up suddenly with soldiers without uniforms
And loaded a few of his cousins — (our cousins).
Some people think of Yasir Arafat or Abu Nidal when you
mention Palestinians.

I think of Walid.
When we tactfully offered Walid parcels of secondhand clothes
for his relatives in the village
He accepted gratefully without taking offense.
How strange to think that someone, somewhere
In Walid's village near Nablus,
Is wearing my shoes now.
Once, not so very long ago,
I was in his shoes.⁴

If you are reasonably content with your life and the state of the world, then the words of John the Baptist will fall on deaf ears. But if you believe things are not the way God intends for them to be, then John the Baptist is beckoning you to become a partner with God in transforming our hurting world.

Peace begins when two people recognize each other as fellow children of God. Might you step into a void where compassion is needed, where justice is lacking, and where peace is a distant dream?

Prepare the way for Christ to be born again in you, open to surprises that come your way, and ready to embrace the adventure waiting to unfold.

NOTES

1. Tom Are, "Metanoia Moments," December 6, 2020.
2. Liz Milner, "I am Waiting," *journeywithjesus.net*, December 3, 2023.
3. Thomas G. Long and Donyelle C. McCray, *A Surprising God*, (Westminster John Knox, 2021), pp. 3-4.
4. Dan Almagor, "In My Shoes."

Advent Hope 2 ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Be Still and know that God is here.

Be Still and know that God is.

Be still and know God.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Be.

Gracious God, on this second Sunday of Advent when we focus our thoughts on peace, we pray that you will come and fill our hearts with your peace that surpasses all understanding. There is too much turmoil and unrest in our world – devastating wars, gun violence, turbulence within families, divisive politics, racial strife, the rise of hate groups. And for many, there are days when there is turmoil and unrest in our souls. Fear of illness or failure or financial ruin. Days of despair when sadness hangs heavy on our hearts. Times of exhaustion with too much to do and times of loneliness when there is no one to listen.

Loving God, we pray for your spirit of peace to calm minds overcome with anxiety, to mend families filled with tension, and communities wrought with strife. We pray for peace between nations, peace for the planet and peace in the depths of our being.

Mighty God, in times when people and events seem out of control, we need your anti-anxiety assurance and your courage in-the-face-of-fear spirit that can spawn in us calmness and serenity. O Lord, Come and fill our hearts with your peace so that we may become the loving people you want us to become.

Eternal God, we know that Jesus did not give us his prayer to pray only in private or alone. So, we join our voices together and pray the prayer he taught us saying, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**