

1 Samuel 3: 1-10
John 1:43-51
January 18, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Last week we heard Mark's account of Jesus' baptism. Whatever else Jesus' baptism represents, it is important for this fact: it is the supreme moment in John's spiritual journey. All his life John has been preparing himself to recognize the messiah when he appears. Along the way he has attracted disciples who are captivated by his expectation. He shares with them the teaching of the scriptures and the spiritual practices which he believes are necessary for a person to recognize the messiah when he comes.

Scholars debate whether John knows Jesus by sight. The fact that he is a somewhat distant cousin to Jesus is no guarantee that they have met. Jesus has spent nearly all of his time in Nazareth and Capernaum far to the north of where John is baptizing. Nevertheless it is likely that Elizabeth told the story to her son—probably over and over—about the remarkable encounter when Mary announced that she was pregnant and Elizabeth's baby seemed to leap for joy in her womb.

Yet again, it is one thing to know a human being as a person and quite another to recognize him as the messiah. We find this dilemma in the reading from 1 Samuel. How do we recognize in the sound of a human voice the very voice of God?

How does a person call attention to the coming of a messiah he has not yet encountered? What prompts a person to develop such a deep yearning for God to come to humanity that she or he devotes an entire lifetime to proclaiming that someone is coming who will fulfill God's promises through the voices of the prophets of scripture? What causes people

to gather by the river to hear this message, be immersed in the water and be instructed in the scriptures and disciplines of holy anticipation?

And yet in ways which cannot be explained in mere language, when Jesus appears to John, a lifetime of faithful and unrewarded expectation is fulfilled. AHA! Epiphany!

What is clear in today's reading is that John's recognition is not immediately shared by his disciples. They must recognize Jesus for themselves. He has done his best to prepare them. He has communicated to his disciples that there *is a messiah who is coming*. This is so important. We cannot expect that of which we are unaware. It has been John's mission to deepen in his disciples what the book of Hebrews calls. "the assurance of what we hope for; the conviction of what we do not see." (Heb. 11:1)

Yet nurturing the expectation of a coming messiah is not enough. John has taught the disciples the tools, the spiritual practices which will allow the disciples to recognize the messiah for themselves. I hope next week to address this second dimension of a growing spiritual life.

I propose that our first commitment is to nourish ourselves and our sisters and brothers *a gut level trust in the message that the messiah has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth*.

I know we are supposed already to have this deep gut commitment. That's why we are here right? We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Certainly, we pay a pastor who must believe this proclamation! Maybe we think that in our moments of doubt the pastor will believe *for us*.

Would it disturb you to know that often I am not so sure? Would it disturb you to know how often it has been *your* faith that has revived my own? Will I be disturbed if I find that you

also are not so sure? Shall we all confess to the imposter syndrome where we fear that on the last day we will be exposed for spiritual frauds?

Not long after this great epiphany John is arrested and put in prison. He hears stories about what this messiah is doing and it shakes him to the foundation. He sends disciples—note that there are disciples who refuse to follow Jesus and stay loyal to John—to Jesus and asks, “Are you really the One who is to come or shall we look for another?”

Is not this reassuring? John the Baptist is not a bulwark of certainty. He has days of doubt which must be extremely painful since he has devoted his entire life to proclaiming one who may turn out to be a false hope!

So in the community of *faith* we do not cultivate certainty. We nourish *faith: the assurance that what we hope for is not false but reliable; the conviction of what we do not see* but nevertheless make the foundation of our lives come what may. The gift of this understanding is that we come to rely on God to nourish us in God’s truth. We are saved from being a group of experts on what God thinks and wants. As someone has observed experts suffer from never being surprised. They can only learn what is consistent with what they already know. They are never surprised by a new thought. God spare us from being experts! God confirm us in being *amateurs*. The Latin root of the word amateur means *love*. Amateurs are people who do something for the love of it all. In this sense, God is the ultimate amateur; for “God so loved the world that he gave his only son....” (Jn. 3:16) It is why Paul writes that we may be experts in all things biblical and spiritual but if we have no love we accomplish nothing. (I Cor. 13)

Yet being amateurs in no way implies that we are ill informed, or clumsy. As amateurs we possess the most important knowledge that there is. We know the power that created the universe and which works through humanity to accomplish all that is worth doing. It is a power that we find in a man who lived 2000 years ago in back water part of a great empire and whose life, teachings, execution and resurrection have endured the centuries to this very day.

Are not we here this morning because somewhere along the way some rank amateur told us about this man, what he taught and how he lived and died—all for love. Some flawed and uncertain person or community of persons shared that love and what it meant to them. Some person or persons, for the love of it all took the time to awaken in us that spark of hope and showed us how to recognize that love in the world and most importantly in our lives. Maybe they did not use these words but the intent was and remains, “Come and see.” Come and see *for yourself* the face of divine love. Come and meet the greatest amateur who ever lived—and who continues to live in amateurs like us. Amen.