

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
January 10, 2010 – Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a

voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

There is a scene in the Marx Brothers' movie, *Duck Soup*, in which Groucho leaves the bedroom of the matronly Margaret Dumont. Just after he leaves, while Dumont has gone into her dressing room, Chico enters the room, disguised as Groucho – long nightgown, floppy nightcap, round glasses, and the trademark bushy mustache. In the movie, we know it is Chico because we have seen him don the disguise. When Dumont returns to the bedroom, she, however, is surprised to find him there and says so, since she has seen leave. "Oh no," Chico says, "I no leave." "But I saw you," protests Dumont, "with my own eyes." In a wildly absurd response, Chico says, "Well, who you gonna believe? Me or your own eyes?"

Perceptive question that. What we experience through our senses frequently deceives us. We see and hear what we want. Do you remember the story of Orson Welles' Mercury Theater of the Air broadcast in the 1930s? Welles put on an updated version of H. G. Well's *War Of The Worlds*, the story of the invasion of Earth from Mars.

The writers of the radio show picked Grover's Mill, New Jersey as the landing site of the Martian invasion force. When the show was broadcast, it was so realistic that people believed it. They "saw" the Martian invading forces advancing across the fields of corn. Frightened farmers grabbed their shotguns and headed into town to fight the aliens. As they headed into town, they passed the water tower of the town. Expecting to see Martian spacecrafts and, perhaps, wanting to see those spacecraft, when they saw the tower, the farmers opened fire. It is said that the bullet holes could still be seen. Those men saw what wasn't there.

Our expectations are powerful. They shape our experiences. If we believe something is there, and believe it strongly enough, we will see it.

That truth should make us wonder about the expectations of the crowd

as described in Luke's gospel for today. What did the people hope to see? What did they want to see?

According to the text, the crowds had some expectations about John the baptizing one. When they came to hear him preach, it was not merely because he preached powerful sermons or because he offered them a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. They left Jerusalem and the surrounding towns to head into the Wilderness regions because John fit their expectations of a prophet. Perhaps, they remembered the words of Isaiah giving voice to the hopes of the people for the divine redemption to rescue them again and saw John fulfilling that role.

After all, John was rough, plain spoken, and fearless. He stormed and shouted when he preached, calling them to be God's people and to change their ways. He expressed the high demands of following the ways of God. John, in his camel skin robe and his wild beard, looked the part of an ancient prophet come to life.

There was so much buzz about John that the people even began to think that he might be the promised Messiah. Those people lining the banks of the River Jordan looked at John and saw what they wanted to see – John as the savior of the people sent by God.

Seeing things to fit our expectations can go the other way as well. That is, sometimes we do not see something because it does not much our expectations.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes a psychology experiment at a college. The experimenter flashes six playing cards in front of the subject who is supposed to identify them as quickly as possible and is ranked on how many the subject gets correctly. Then, the cards are flashed more and more slowly until anyone ought to be able to identify all of them correctly, but the subject still could not identify one of the cards. Finally, the experimenter places the cards on the table in front of the subject one at a time. At that point, the subject realizes why there had been such dif-

ficulty. One of the cards was a six of spades, but it was red and not black. You see, someone had changed the rules; the subject did not see what was expected, and could not grasp the altered reality.

That example helps illustrate the dilemma the people at the river experienced as they looked at Jesus. He was not what they expected to see, so they did not really see him or anything related to him. The crowds wanted someone with angry words and an emotionally laden message. When they looked at Jesus, they saw a man who said, Blessed are the peacemakers.” They expected someone to serve as a great judge who would wreak punishment on their enemies and burn those enemies with a holy fire. Instead, they saw a roving preacher whose ministry was primarily financed by women, who associated with sinners and outcasts, and who healed people on the Sabbath. They wanted to see a hero warrior and king, like David, who would restore the fortunes of the nation. What they got was a gentle teacher who wept over Jerusalem before riding into town on a donkey only to be arrested, tried, and nailed on a cross. The people did not want to see a Messiah like that. Thus, they overlooked him because of their expectations.

We have to wonder what the people saw from the banks of the river that day and what they could have seen. We have to expect that they saw John, standing in the river, calling all people to be baptized for the remission of sins. And, they saw a man who walked into the water and stood next to John, who baptized him. But, then, something happened. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, each described the event in different ways. But, what else did the people see? Did they see anything else at all? Did they hear anything at all? It is hard for me to believe that they would reject this Jesus and his teachings if they had seen and heard what Luke described.

And so, we face our own questions of faith. What do we see as we look toward God? What do we see as we look toward Jesus? What do we expect to see?

Perhaps, we would want to see a God who would grant all of our desires, no matter what they are. Or, do we expect to see a God who is not at all concerned with the world? What kind of Messiah do we want? Is it possible for us to look openly and honestly or will we see just what we want to see?

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Operating Instructions*, tells the story of a family being interviewed on *60 Minutes* by Ed Bradley. The family consisted of a religiously devout mother, a painfully shy father, and their ten year old daughter who was wheel-chair bound because of spinal bifida. Every year, this family made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France where healing is reputed to occur.

According to Lamott, Bradley was giving the family a tough time for being so gullible. At one point, he turned to the young girl and asked, “When you pray there, what do you pray for?” She replied, “I prayed that my father won’t be so shy. It makes him terribly lonely.”

That reply stopped Bradley for a few seconds, but then he pressed ahead and questioned the family’s wisdom in spending thousands of dollars every year going to Lourdes without a miracle. The mother, looking at her daughter who showed just loving concern for her father answered, “Oh, Mr. Bradley, you don’t get it. We have our miracle.”

Ed Bradley had his expectations. He obviously believed that the only miracle worth seeing was the one that fit his definition – the little girl would get up out of the wheel chair and walk. Unfortunately, he missed the miracle of a daughter’s growing love and the miracle of a family held together by faith. He missed the miracle of a joy growing in a family that, by all rights, should not have any joy. He saw what he wanted to see and expected to see and missed the truth that God often works in ways we do not expect. He missed the truth that God’s mercy and grace break the bounds of our narrow imaginations.

Dear people of God, on this day as we remember the Baptism of Jesus

and, perhaps, reflect on our own baptism and its meaning for our lives, may we clearly see the presence of God with us in complete clarity. May we know that God desires for us to love God and to love one another. May we know that God wants us to seek truth and justice. May we see that Jesus embodies these qualities and calls us to follow him. May we open our lives to see the possibility of God's work within us all.
AMEN.