

### ***A Reed Shaken by the Wind***

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Christmas is a time of high hopes and expectations. We all have in our minds a picture of how we would like things to be, and our preparations for the coming holiday are geared toward making that picture a reality. For most of us, that means getting things in order for a number of family traditions – and maybe introducing a few new ones. So we are decorating, planning family get-togethers, going shopping, and lining things up to make this year's celebrations something to remember. We want everything to come out just right to fulfill our hopes.

Of course, things never come out quite like we expect or hope, do they? Once in a while they do, perhaps; but usually there's something that goes wrong. We can't find that perfect gift for someone special, or maybe we can find it but can't afford it. Or someone (especially a child) doesn't receive a gift they had their heart set on; or someone gets sick, or weather problems delay the arrival of a family member – or worse, the family gathering erupts into one of those little spats that puts the whole celebration under a dark cloud. Whatever. When it happens, and things don't go as we hoped, there's going to be frustration, disillusionment, and disappointment.

And we who are looking forward to celebrating the birth of our Lord have even higher expectations for Christmas. We are looking for a certain spiritual experience at this time of year. Through the music, the familiar Scriptures, the good news of the Savior's birth, and the powerful message of God's great love for us, we want to feel the joy of the season and rejoice with the angels giving glory to God. We want to be changed by what God did for us at Christmas and live in the peace that the angels sang about: peace with God and also with all people. We'd really like to walk on that "way of holiness" that Isaiah mentions in today's Old Testament lesson. But Christmas comes, maybe we feel that momentary rush of joy, we get a little misty-eyed singing *Silent Night* by candlelight on Christmas Eve; but by the second week of January it's back to the same old grind. Here, the King has come to us once again, our hopes were high – but when it's all over, it's a big disappointment. We don't seem to be any better off than we were before. And though we might not say it in so many words, it seems that Jesus let us down.

John the Baptist had great expectations for what was going to happen once the Messiah was revealed. He knew that the Savior of the world had been born that first Christmas, and that soon he would be ushering in the Kingdom that God's people had longed for so many ages. Last week we heard how John prepared the people for the coming of Jesus by calling them to repentance. We heard how crowds flocked to hear his powerful message and how they were baptized by him in the Jordan. Later, when John himself baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit descend from heaven, and he heard the voice of the Father announcing his approval. Step by step things were falling into place. The prophecies were being fulfilled. Then Jesus began his public ministry, and he was teaching, performing miracles, and driving out demons. It was all exactly what John had been hoping for: now Israel was going to be God's Kingdom on earth.

You see, John had not been taken in by all the hype of his day. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he understood that the Messiah was coming to do so much more than simply restore Israel's fortunes by defeating her enemies and bringing back the glory days of King Solomon. John knew that the real obstacles were not political, they were moral: the nation's bondage was not so much to Rome, but rather to sin, death, and the devil. He knew that the Christ was going to bring about a spiritual transformation of the people. He was going to whip them into shape. Now they would be the people that God wanted them to be: no longer the faithless nation of the past that kept turning to idolatry and sin whenever they had a chance. John was expecting the people to turn from sin forever, and live holy and righteously – and only then, sort of as an added bonus, God would bless his people with earthly wealth and power.

But now, John was disillusioned and disappointed. Things had started so well, with so much promise ... but that seemed long ago now. For months John had been rotting in the dark, hot, dungeon at the fortress of Machaerus. It was on the desolate eastern shore of the Dead Sea. There, out of sight and out of mind, King Herod Antipas warehoused the worst criminals and the most troublesome of his enemies. To be sent there was just about the same as a death sentence. John had irritated the king by publicly accusing him of adultery because Herod had run off with his brother's wife. He had to be silenced – the bad press was ruining Herod's already shaky reputation. And John was still very popular; to try to keep him in Jerusalem would only invite trouble with his large following. So, even though Herod had a grudging respect for him, until John stopped accusing him of living in sin, he was going to stay at Machaerus. Herod hoped the unpleasant lodgings there might encourage John to rethink his position on the king's morality. But John wasn't budging. He was no "reed shaken by the wind". He figured that Jesus would soon bring in the Kingdom of righteousness, put Herod in his place, and set free innocent men such as himself. But it had been so long now that John was beginning to wonder ... and doubt.

And if that were not bad enough, the reports John had been getting of Jesus' ministry were beginning to disturb him. While huge crowds had gathered around him at first, now Jesus was saying things that were driving some people away. There was rising opposition from the corrupt religious leaders, this John expected; but Jesus seemed to shy away from direct confrontations with them. Why didn't he use his divine power to crush them? Then there was this strange report that Jesus had just called a tax collector to be one of his disciples – and instead of directing this wretched traitor of God's people to the strict disciplines of prayer and fasting to show his repentance, as John would have done, the word was Jesus went to a *party* at the man's house ... where there were *other* tax collectors ... and *prostitutes*, and the thing went on into the late hours of the night with feasting, drinking, and music. It was scandalous! Just what kind of Kingdom was he planning to set up, anyway? Had he lost his mind? This wasn't at all what John expected.

For John, Jesus was turning out to be a big disappointment. *"Okay, he's come now; but I'm still in prison, the government is still being run by people with no sense of shame, our religious leaders are still a bunch of corrupt hypocrites, people are still indulging in every sin you can name, the world is still full of sickness, pain, and death, and this Jesus doesn't seem to be doing anything about it. I was so sure at first; but now ... maybe Jesus isn't who I thought he was."*

And when we find ourselves let down after Christmas (or in our Christian life in general), maybe we're thinking the same thing. We say to ourselves, *"Okay, Christ has come into my life: now everything should be better – but if that's true, why do I still have all these problems? Why am I still suffering? Why do I have such a struggle with sin? Why do I still enjoy doing things that I know are wrong? Why don't I get along better with people? Why can't I be more forgiving of their offenses? I thought it would get easier to live and act right – but I'm finding that it's actually getting harder. I'm discovering everyday that I'm worse off, spiritually weaker, than I thought I was. Here, I wanted Jesus to improve my life, and it's just getting worse ... Maybe Jesus isn't who I thought he was."*

And if you find yourself thinking like that, you're probably right. Jesus isn't who you thought he was. And if that's so, the reason is because you, like John, were hoping for the wrong thing. To John the Messiah was going to be a great teacher and moral reformer. He was going to be the final enforcer of God's law. He was going to chop away the unproductive dead wood, separate out the sinful chaff, and burn both up in the fire of Hell. He was going to set up his Kingdom so tight and orderly that no one would ever step out of line. Any violation of the law would bring swift and decisive punishment. You'd walk the straight and narrow way of holiness – or else.

So, John sent a couple of his disciples to Jesus to find out what was going on. Behind the question, *"Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect another?"* is John's real question, *"Why aren't you doing what I hoped you would do?"* The answer Jesus gives is a gentle reprimand, *"John, what were you hoping for? The wholesale destruction of the wicked? Or their healing from wickedness? Listen to what is happening: the blind are seeing, the lame are walking, lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the Gospel is being proclaimed to the poor. All the prophecies are being fulfilled – so, John, strengthen your feeble hands, and steady your failing knees. Don't become fearful: Yes, your God has come with vengeance and retribution; but he's come to save you."*

What John expected was the enforcement of the law by divine compulsion. Jesus answered, *"You were expecting the wrong thing -- those who are spiritually blind, lame, unclean, deaf, poor, and dead cannot be made to obey the law no matter how hard they try. They have to be healed. And when their healing is complete, they won't need to be made to obey, they will do so gladly from their own hearts."*

Jesus went on to pay John a high compliment, *"Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist"*. No question about it. No one was more righteous in the eyes of God than John. John was the embodiment of a life of repentance. No one had more of the genuine desire to please God and obey the law – but that's not good enough. Because struggling to confine yourself to laws that your corrupt heart cannot keep is nothing more than locking yourself into a dark prison of despair – a prison more desolate and unyielding than any dungeon in a fortress by the Dead Sea. By trying to obey the law, that's the absolute best you can achieve. And if we expect Jesus to be simply our moral reformer who will encourage us to do what is right, we are going to be imprisoned and disappointed just like John.

But Jesus went on to say, “*Yet, he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*” Because those who are in the Kingdom have been reborn of water and the Spirit. They’ve be reborn as God’s children. They’ve been forgiven. They’ve been set free by Jesus Christ who died to release them from their bondage to the law. And they are in the process of being healed. Every time the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed to we who are poor in spirit, we lose a little more of our blindness. We are given the strength to walk a little farther. Some of our uncleanness is washed away. We hear just a bit better. What is dead in us is raised to new life. What we are undergoing is the transformation of our rebellious will to become more like the cheerfully obedient will of Christ.

And no, it doesn’t happen over night. It’s a life long growing process that won’t be completed until we die, when we cast away forever the last vestige of sin and death in our lives. And the farther we go, the harder it gets – you should expect that – because your rebellious old nature is a sore loser and wants to fight every inch of the way. But the Lord fights for us and strengthens our feeble hands and weak knees with his powerful message of what he has done for us. By this message he gives us the might and the patience to stay in the fight until the end

I’m quite certain that John understood and trusted that message. His false hopes were corrected. He was reminded of God’s promise to save not by forcing us to obey, but by healing our hearts so that we would delight to obey. And ultimately John was set free from his prison – not with a key, but with a sword that took his life and ended his bondage and struggle with sin forever. But because John trusted his Lord and Savior, he died as one who is great in the kingdom of heaven, and he remains so today. So may we also trust our Savior; and surrendering our false hopes, continue to be healed by his grace and truth as we continue our journey on the Way of Holiness and prepare for his coming. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***