

I

In his book *Horns and Halos*, Dr. J. Wallace Hamilton tells about one of the weirdest auction sales in history; and it was held in Washington, D.C., in 1926, where 150,000 patented models of old inventions were declared obsolete and placed on the auction block for public auction. Prospective buyers and on-lookers chuckled as item after item was put up for bid; such as a "bed-bug buster" or an "illuminated cat" that was designed to scare away mice. Then there was a device to prevent snoring. It consisted of a trumpet that reached from the mouth to the ear; and was designed to awaken the snorer and not the neighbors. And then there was the adjustable pulpit that could be raised or lowered according to the height of the preacher.

Needless to say, this auction of old patent models was worth at least 150,000 laughs; but if we would look into this situation a little deeper, we would discover that these 150,000 old patent models also represent 150,000 broken dreams. (1) They represented a mountain of disappointments.

It may seem inappropriate to talk about broken dreams and disappointments this close to Christmas. After all, this is the season to be jolly. But it's not jolly for everybody, is it? For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing.

Our friend John the Baptist knew about disappointment. John is in prison now and he's looking for a sign "a sign that the long-awaited Messiah has really arrived. That's ironic, don't you think? John the Baptist is the one who first proclaimed his coming. But much has happened to John since we last saw him preaching and baptizing people in the wilderness, and now his heart is cast down.

You'll remember John's message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This message burned in John's soul. John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to King Herod himself. That was why he was in jail.

This was not the King Herod who was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus; this was his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be worse than his father. Herod Antipas seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. The nation was in shock. John the Baptist condemned the king's behavior and was placed in prison. While in prison John realized that his career as a prophet would soon be ended. His life would be over as well.

There was one thing that John wanted to know before he died. John wanted to know beyond a shadow of a doubt if Jesus was really the Messiah. Can you blame him? He had given everything he had "including, in a matter of days, his very life. He wanted to know, has it all been in vain? Is it all an illusion - a dream? In the wilderness John had believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but in the face of certain death he has some doubts. He wanted to know for sure. So he sent some of his followers to find Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

You see, John the Baptist found himself in a disappointing and disheartening predicament. Things were not working out like he had expected. Sometimes that happens. Disappointment.

Particularly at Christmas. This is not an easy time of year. A few years back there was a haunting country song that went like this, "If we make it through December...." Some of you know the meaning of those words. "If we make it through December...." It was December for John the Baptist. He was hurting in Herod's prison. He was hurting physically and he was hurting emotionally. He was gripped with disappointment.

John Was Disappointed, First of all, Because He Had Different Expectations of What a Messiah Would Do.

He was a product of his time. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected "one who would drive out the despised Romans and establish the kingdom of God. While languishing in prison John must have wondered why more wasn't happening. What's he waiting for? he must have thought to himself time and time again. Why doesn't he drive the Roman dogs out? He was disappointed because of his faulty expectations.

Leo Buscaglia learned about that kind of disappointment as a teenager. He writes, "I remember the sudden appearance under my family's Christmas tree of the largest present I had ever hoped to see. It stood at least a foot taller than I and was twice as heavy; and wonder of wonders, it had my name on it. For two whole weeks before Christmas, this present towered above all others and it defied any conventional attempts to learn of its contents before its time."

During the weeks leading up to Christmas he could think of nothing else but his present under the tree. He imagined all sorts of terrific presents. On Christmas Day his family gathered together. "The main attraction was to be the opening of my present." Buscaglia remembered. "How many times in the past two weeks I had anticipated this moment. Even as I was opening it, I remember experiencing a vague sense of disappointment " the Great Mystery was about to end and I would no longer be able to engage in my soaring dreams."

His present turned out to be a beautiful handmade desk his uncle had built. "By this time nothing of this world could have satisfied my expectations. I can't imagine what I had expected. Still, in that disappointment was a lesson which would last a lifetime." (2)

Sometimes we are disappointed, not because what we receive is bad, but because we have faulty expectations. There are people in this very room who feel that life has somehow cheated them, but I can guarantee you that if you lost everything you have right now, and then suddenly had it all restored, you would be exceedingly grateful. The problem is not what we have, but our expectations.

John the Baptist expected the Messiah to come by storm, but nothing much seemed to be happening. It was not Jesus who was at fault, but John's expectations. That is the first reason he was gripped by disappointment.

The Second Reason John Was Disappointed Was That He Was Looking For All the Wrong Signs.

The followers of John the Baptist caught up with Jesus. They asked Jesus John's question, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the

deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." The day of the Lord had arrived. There was evidence that God's kingdom had begun. "Just look around," Jesus told John's followers, "to see what is happening."

Centuries before, there was a prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied about what would take place when the Messiah would arrive. Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer." Those weren't the signs John was looking for. He was looking for something more dramatic. He was looking for thunder and lightning.

Charles Kuralt, in his travels across the United States, found what looked like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place in the Rockies. "Trees need good soil and good weather and up here there's no soil and terrible weather," Kuralt notes. "Nothing can live up here and certainly not trees. That's why the tree is a kind of miracle."

On a barren stretch of U.S. 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. "Nobody remembers who put the first Christmas ornament on it" some whimsical motorist of years ago. From that day to this, the tree has been redecorated each year. Nobody knows who does it. But each year by Christmas Day, the tree has become a Christmas tree.

"The tree, which has no business growing here at all has survived against all the odds." People who live miles away in all directions know and love the tree. "Just looking at it makes you think about how unexpected life on earth can be. The tree is so lonely and so brave that it seems to offer courage to those who pass it" and a message. It is the Christmas message: that there is life and hope even in a rough world." (3) Isaiah wrote, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."

But see, those aren't the kinds of signs that impress people. We want greatness writ large. That's not God's way. God chooses to work in the little insignificant places of life" like a manger, a carpenter's shop and a cross.

The Third Reason John Was Disappointed Was That He Didn't Give God Time.

John wanted action now! We can understand that, can't we, in light of his current situation? But God takes his own sweet time. After all, He has been working on this world for hundreds of millions of years. But His purpose is just as sure and His plan is just as unstoppable.

Lincoln Steffens remembers one Christmas while growing up when he wanted a pony more than anything. "I prayed and hoped I would get a pony," he wrote. "My good little sisters -- to comfort me -- remarked that Christmas was coming, but Christmas was always coming and grown-ups were always talking about it, asking you what you wanted." His parents played games with him, asking him what he wanted for Christmas. "All I want is a pony," he told them. "If I can't have a pony, give me nothing, nothing."

Christmas Day arrived and the children were up at 6:00 a.m. At first they were overwhelmed by all the presents. "My sisters had knelt down, each by her pile of gifts; they were squealing with delight, till they looked up and saw me standing there in my nightgown with nothing. Nothing." The young boy didn't get the pony he wanted more than anything else for Christmas. His sisters

joined him in his agony, running back to their bedrooms crying. He refused to eat anything. He was too upset. He went out to the stable, and his mother came out to comfort him. He noticed his father watching him from a window for a couple of hours. This was his worst Christmas ever - not one present.

Then he noticed a man riding a pony down the street, a pony with a brand new saddle, and it was a boy's saddle. The man was reading the numbers of the houses. "He looked at our door and passed by," Lincoln remembered. That was the last straw. He flung himself on the ground and began crying uncontrollably. "Say, kid," the stranger asked, "do you know a boy named Lennie Steffens?" "Yes," he spluttered through tears, "that's me." "Well," he said, "then this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you." The man told Lennie his excuses for being so late, but the boy never heard them. "I could scarcely wait." Before too long he was riding down the street on his pony. To this day he still doesn't know if that was his best Christmas or his worst. (4) You see, the pony was always coming. It was Lennie's impatience and uncertainty that drove him to the brink of despair.

I've been there, haven't you? God doesn't work according to our time schedule, but according to His. And sometimes He doesn't appear to be working at all. But He is. He is. Certainly, he wasn't working according to John the Baptist's timetable. But he was working. The fact that we celebrate the life of John the Baptist two thousand years later is proof that he was working.

How about you? Is your life filled with disappointments because you have unrealistic expectations? Are, you looking in all the wrong places to find your happiness? Have you learned to wait upon the Lord?

The kindergarten teacher carefully lined up four little "cherubs" for the annual Christmas program. Each carried a huge cut out letter. As they stood side by side the letters would spell "star." A slight mixup occurred and those present in the church nearly fell out of their pews as the four little performers took their places "in reverse." They spelled out "rats," not star. That's what happens when you get your priorities out of order.

Bethlehem teaches us about expectations, about signs, and about patience. God begins with a simple babe and humble surroundings and He works slowly, surely. But He is at work. Let us not lose hope. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

1. Rev. Robert Morgan, Montgomery UMC, Montgomery, Texas

2. Leo Buscaglia, BUS 9 TO PARADISE (New York: Slack, 1986), pp. 25-26.

3. Charles Kuralt, ON THE ROAD WITH CHARLES KURALT (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), pp. 315-316.

4. Lincoln Steffens, "A Miserable Merry Christmas," FAMILY CHRISTMAS (Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association, 1984), pp. 141-146.

Dynamic Preaching, Collected Sermons, by King Duncan

II

Child

The other night I picked up my newspaper and I saw a big picture of a can of peaches. (Show the advertisement that shows a picture of something big and begin talking about it) Oh, boy, how I like peaches and I wanted some to eat right then. How many of you like peaches? That picture makes your mouth water. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted them. In a little while, I was reading a magazine and I saw the most beautiful picture of a new car. It made me think of how old my car is and how many miles it's been driven. Oh, how I wanted that new car!

How many of you boys and girls have been looking at pictures and thinking about what you would like to have for Christmas? (Perhaps they may wish to tell you what they have seen that they would like to have)

Well, all of those things would be fine to have. And you saw them all in newspapers and magazines and catalogues. Do you know what we call things like that that we see? Advertisements! That's right.

I want to tell you this morning about a real man who was an advertisement. He talked about somebody else who was to come later and who could belong to them if they wanted him. Would you like to have a real person belong to you? Well, that's what the living advertisement said. Do you know who the advertisement was? You don't? Let me tell you his name, even though I know that you've heard it before. He was John the Baptist. How many of you have heard of him? Good. Do you know who he was talking about that could belong to you? Jesus, that's right. John came first, just like the commercials or advertisements. He came to tell you about Jesus and when you get anxious and you really want the real thing, then you can have Jesus. I wish that all of you would be like John the Baptist and tell others about Jesus. Then we could call you living advertisements. But it is important especially on this Third Sunday of Advent to be joyful like Isaiah and today's antiphon tells us. Okay?

Adult

The Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, is full of dynamic leaders. There is Noah and Moses, Abraham and David. There are kings and queens, male and female judges, patriarchs and matriarchs. But of all the people in the Hebrew Scriptures, the most dynamic are the prophets: Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and so many others. They challenged the world and drew people to listen, to change, to

follow. Some stood up to the King in support of justice, "How dare you put Uriah to death so you can have Bathsheba his wife," Nathan said to King David. "How dare you put Naboth to death so you can steal his vineyard," Elijah said to King Ahab.

Some prophets were so powerful that they would determine who would reign as King. The prophet Samuel was told by God to anoint Saul to be king, and then he was told to reject Saul and anoint the youngest son of Jesse, David. Some prophets drew the attention of the entire

nation yet spoke in symbolic ways like the prophet Hosea who married Gomer, a woman of ill repute, as a sign of the way that God's people had treated him. Others spoke directly to the people of God's power, his compassion and his love, like Isaiah in our first reading for today. Some prophets were mystics like Ezekiel. Some were on the inner loop with the king, counselors like Jeremiah. Others were just common everyday people, like Amos, a dresser of trees.

The prophets were all very different one from the other, but their message was the same: Repent and reform. Return your lives to your God, and the Lord will come and be with his people. Nothing, not torture, not death, not even money would turn the prophet from his message or tempt him to abandon his faith. In difficult times, the prophet would tell the people, "Hold on to your faith, the world will be transformed by the Lord when he comes."

Sometimes their message was frightening, such as their predictions of the sufferings of the evil at the end of time. Sometimes their message was consoling, like the message of the first reading for today, when Isaiah speaks about the desert blooming, the blind seeing and the deaf hearing. But always their message to the people was to be strong in their faith. The people needed to be ready for the Lord's coming.

The ancient people believed that as long as there was a prophet among them, they were blessed. God was communicating to his people. If there was no prophet, then that was a sign that somehow the people's sins had turned God away from them.

By the time of Jesus' life, it had been two hundred years since the people of Israel had last had a prophet in their midst. Two hundred years. Two hundred years of no intimate communication with God.

And then, John the Baptist appeared. He was dynamic. His message wasn't new: he told the people to repent and reform and prepare for their God. That was the same as all the prophets. But there was a power these people had never seen before in his words. And John added something; He said that God is coming *now*. The Kingdom of God is *at hand*. People were drawn to John. It was obvious to them that God was once more blessing his people.

John did not offer people a semi-spiritual semi-emotional experience. He demanded that the people remain faithful to their traditions. He followed Isaiah's first reading for today, "Strengthen the knees that are weak, the hands that are feeble, and say, "Be strong, fear not. Here is your God." John was not a fad. He was not a reed in the wind, changing the way it leans with every new gust of air, every new whim. John was a rock anchored on his faith in God. His infectious dynamism led people to a strict

adherence to their faith. They accepted his baptism as a sign of their participation in a new world order, the Kingdom of God.

We modern people are also looking for a prophet. But what type of prophet are we looking for? What type of prophecy do we seek? Are we looking for a prophet like John who is going to tell us to hold on to our faith, change those hidden parts of our lives that are self-destructive? Maybe he will tell us to give up that grudge we love to nourish, or perhaps it is that secret little vice that

is only a secret from our conscience but quite apparent to all around us. Are we looking for someone to tell us to stand up for our faith, or are we looking for a reed shaken by the wind? We have got to admit it, there is a part of all of us that would love to hear someone tell us that certain of our secrets are now no longer sinful. We'd love to hear someone say, "These are modern times, this or that is OK now, even if it was unacceptable before." We'd love to follow a reed that is bent by the winds of moral decay. But then we would not be listening to a prophet. We would not be listening to God's dynamic voice. We would only be hearing our own selfishness.

Whom do we go out to the desert to see? Someone who will give us a lovely emotional experience while permitting us to compromise on morality. Or do we go out to the desert to see someone who will encourage us to stand up against the pressures our society places upon us to compromise our consciences. We come to Church not for entertainment, not to see our beautiful children, but for the strength to be ready for the Lord to enter our lives.

There is not a whole lot of time left. Our lives are really very short.

And the kingdom of God is at hand.

III

FB is really interesting now. I put a post on FB which was political. I was criticized for putting something political. I was called a ruthenanglican, a Russian troll and a failed Kenedy Democrat. What my post was is that we should respond with respect of what others post concerning today's political climate.

This morning we meet John the Baptist in very odd circumstances. And what we discover is his deep disappointment with Jesus. If you remember back to last week, we first met John in the wilderness - a wild man with a hairy shirt and a locust diet - a passionate prophet who was ranting and raving about the wrath of God. Calling those of us in the crowd and in these pews a brood of vipers, he made it clear that the wrath of God Almighty will devour all of us who do not confess and change our ways. And if we don't repent, the consequences will be clear. The ax of God's judgment will cut us down and we will be thrown into the torture of unquenchable fire. Now, what I can't figure out is that, rather than walking away, according to the third chapter of Matthew, the crowds of people just kept coming back for more - more of John's verbal abuse. Jesus, of course, was one of the crowd. Why? Because God, in human disguise, was living and feeling and yearning just like all the rest of us. But, scripture tells us, when John saw Jesus, he immediately knew that Jesus was the One - the One all of Israel had been waiting for. And he, John, did not consider himself worthy to carry the sandals of Jesus. "No," John shouts: "Jesus is about to baptize with fire. And then with a winnowing fork, this mighty Messiah will separate the chaff from the wheat. And all unrepentant sinners will be cast into the furnace of hell." Not a very comforting scene, is it?

Now, fast forward two years to today's text. John is in prison because, with his usual

offensive audacity, he has spoken truth to power. Yes, John has told Herod that it was wrong for him to commit adultery. It was wrong for him to steal his brother's wife and then sleep with her. Such judgment has gotten John in deep trouble, and today he languishes in a prison cell awaiting his death. And while he sits there, he begins to hear all the things that Jesus is doing. And he has lots of time to think. Yes, John has lots of time to begin to realize that Jesus is not acting the way the Messiah - according to John - should act. Rather than blazing with the fire of indignation, Jesus seems to be telling stories and playing with children. Rather than railing against the sins of the world, Jesus is eating with tax collectors and prostitutes and poor people. Rather than tossing people into the blistering cauldron of hell, he is listening to them, forgiving them, and changing them from the inside out. Our Bible study group came up with a wonderful image. What John expected in a Messiah was a rottweiler, growling and attacking the sinners of the world. But what he got was a puppy, changing hearts with warmth and affection. No wonder John has started asking the question: "Is this the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Now, in order to figure out this passage, we need to digress for just a minute into the world of the prophets. Contrary to popular opinion, prophets in the Bible are not primarily fortune tellers who predict what is going to happen in the future. They are much more social commentators who accurately describe what is going on now - and usually in ways that people don't want to hear. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets were those men and women who experienced the mystery of God in some deep and personal way, and then felt called to articulate what they had seen and heard for others. Marcus Borg defines the Hebrew prophets this way: "I see them as God-

intoxicated voices of radical social criticism, and God-intoxicated advocates of an alternative social vision. Their dream is God's dream."1

According to this definition, John the Baptist was a true-blue prophet - a God- intoxicated dreamer who passionately advocated for God's alternative social vision of shalom. But passionate as he was, in the long run, John wasn't very persuasive. Walter Brueggemann has made a very helpful distinction between prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing - both of which appear in abundance in the Hebrew Scriptures. Prophetic criticizing takes a laser-sharp look at the world and lifts up all the blatant sin and selfishness of the world. Prophetic criticizing proclaims God's dream and desire for creation and then attacks each one of us in the heart of our apathy and our greed. Prophetic criticizing drops bombs of honest judgment and leaves us writhing in the ashes of guilt and failure, with radical repentance the only hope for survival. Prophetic criticizing has its prominent place in scripture, as John the Baptist can attest to. And God has the right to put it there. But there is very little good news in prophetic criticizing.

The other form of prophetic activity is prophetic energizing. And it is equally prominent in scripture. This form of proclamation is centered in hope. Despite our sin and our failures as God's people, God has not given up on us or the world. And God is about to do a new thing with and for the world that we have desecrated. When those disciples

come back to Jesus and ask him John's question, Jesus responds with classic prophetic energizing. Is he, Jesus, the Messiah, or should John - should we - look for another? Quoting Isaiah, Jesus presents his positive messianic vision, his description of the new social order that God is bringing about: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news - not bad news - brought to them. And then knowing that John will be very disappointed in these words, Jesus adds a wistful benediction: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

It is clear that in his preaching and teaching, Jesus combined prophetic criticizing with prophetic energizing. He railed at the legalistic religious authorities of his day, calling them "hypocrites" and "broods of vipers." He gently criticized Martha for her anxious busyness and the woman at the well for her promiscuous lifestyle. But he constantly

forgave the ones he criticized and then energized them with visions of new chances, new beginnings, new opportunities for abundant living. I believe that Jesus took the prophetic vocation and carried it one step further. He combined prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing by embodying them both. Through prophetic actualizing, Jesus became the incarnation of the dream, the embodiment of the new social order, the one who walked the walk and lived the vision. And, brothers and sisters, as the Body of Christ, we are called to do the same.

There is a wonderful parable that tells us what "prophecy actualized" might look like in our lives. There was once a woman who was disappointed, who was disillusioned, who was depressed. She wanted a good world, a peaceful world, and she wanted to be a good person. But the newspaper and television showed her how far we were from such a reality. So she decided to go shopping. She went to the mall and wandered into a new store - where the person behind the counter looked strangely like Jesus.

Gathering up her courage she went up to the counter and asked, "Are you Jesus?"

"Well, yes, I am," the man answered. "Do you work here?" "Actually," Jesus responded, "I own the store. You are free to wander up and down the aisles, see what it is I sell, and then make a list of what you want. When you are finished, come back here, and we'll see what we can do for you."

So, the woman did just that. And what she saw thrilled her. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air. She wrote furiously and finally approached the counter, handing a long list to Jesus. He skimmed the paper, and then smiling at her said, "No problem." Reaching under the counter, he grabbed some packets and laid them out on the counter.

Confused, she asked, "What are these?" Jesus replied: "These are seed packets. You see, this is a catalogue store." Surprised the woman blurted out, "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No," Jesus gently responded. "This is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. Then you plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits." "Oh," she said, deeply disappointed in Jesus. Then she turned around and left the store without buying anything.²

Friends, I believe that our passage for today speaks to us about our calling as Christians in a world of violence, in a world of increasing poverty, in a world of terrorism and intolerance. As disciples of Jesus, our text for today is calling us to follow him as those who embrace his prophetic vocation. Yes, we are called to criticize when necessary. We are called always to energize with hopeful visions of a new social order. But most of all, we are called to actualize Jesus' passionate dream of a whole and healed world. We are called to actualize God's creative plan by the way we live our daily lives.

So, my friends, let's pick up those packets of seeds. And let's plant them - for the sake of our children and all the children of the world.

May it be so - for you and for me. Amen