

## *Filled with expectation*

The First Sunday after the Epiphany - January 9, 2022

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen. Collect for the Baptism of Jesus, the First Sunday after the Epiphany*

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Luke 3:15-16,21-22*

If all goes according to plan, my last Sunday with you will be seven weeks from today. Knowing that this time will go quickly, and wanting to end well, I invited our wardens and all parish clergy and staff to join me in a conversation this past Thursday. Together, we began to consider how the parish can run as smoothly as possible, during my remaining time with you and beyond.

A few people on the call mentioned comments and interpretations they have heard – some positive, some not – about my resignation, and the timing of it, and more. This sort of conjecture seems natural. If you have related thoughts or questions, or even if you are feeling disappointment or anger, and if it may help, please set up a time to talk with me.

Most of our meeting this past Thursday was devoted to questions of what will happen after I leave. Or maybe I should say *who* will happen after I leave:

- How will we get a good interim rector?
- When will he or she start?
- What is the diocese doing?
- What can we do?
- What if we don't have an interim lined up when you leave?
- And, of course: What about the rector search?

These are all appropriate questions. The fact that we – or *you* – so far have so few clear answers is a cause for understandable concern. For the moment, though, I believe that the operative word should be *concern* rather than *alarm*. Interim leadership is sometimes resolved late in the game. One motive for the conversation on Thursday was to begin to consider how roles and resources may be aligned in advance in the event that an interim rector is unable to start right away.

You may now be wondering how any of this has anything to do with the Scripture readings that we've heard and the Baptism of Jesus that we celebrate today. My connections may be a stretch, but I notice three features in today's gospel that may shed light on present and upcoming moments here at Ascension.

To begin, the first verse of today's gospel tells us that, " ... *the people were filled with expectation* ..." The Gospel of Luke is uniquely filled with *expectation*, and of a particular kind. The different forms of the Greek word used by Luke<sup>1</sup> could all be translated as 'waiting-with-expectation.' In Chapter 1 of Luke, as the priest Zechariah offers incense in the temple sanctuary, the archangel Gabriel appears and says to him, ' ... *your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John* ...' (1:13b) The narrative point of view soon shifts to those who are praying outside the sanctuary: "... *the people were 'waiting-with-expectation' for Zechariah, and wondered at his*

*delay ...*” (1:21) Later in the gospel, the public ministry of Jesus seems to stall when he unexpectedly leaves Galilee. And then we learn that “... *when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all ‘waiting-with-expectation’ for him.*” (8:40)

Some of you may know this particular quality of *waiting-with-expectation* that Luke describes in these instances and in the opening moment of today’s gospel. This *waiting-with-expectation* is intrinsic to what is classically understood as a spiritual practice, grounded in and arising from the hope and belief that God has acted or is acting or will act. If you know this particular kind of expectation, I hope you will allow it to be present to and inform your thoughts and prayers about what lies ahead here at Ascension in the weeks and months to come, and beyond.

Those who were ‘filled with expectation’ at the start of today’s gospel were also questioning: “... *all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah ...*” In all four gospels, John the Baptist himself makes clear that he was not meant to be and is not the Messiah but that he was to prepare the way for the One who is. So it is that in the Gospel of Mark John names Jesus as “...*the one who ... is coming after me ...*” (1:7) Although John’s part in the salvation story is critical, he knows that his time has come to step out of the way; an even more powerful and purposeful revelation for all the people awaits.

With regard to my own ministry as Rector here at Ascension, I trust it is abundantly clear to all that I have not been nor am I a messiah. I do feel drawn to this part of today’s gospel due to my self-assessment over the past year that led me to conclude that now is my time to get out of the way, to make way for another and for the good that God may have in mind for all the people here.

Allow me here to share with you that over the past 25 years I have left four other parishes, two as interim rector and two as rector. All four rectors who followed me in those parishes are still faithfully serving today, except for one who retired after twelve years. I suppose I should add that past performance is no guarantee of future results, but I am hopeful for you with regard to the one who will come after me and what lies ahead for you.

To continue with in the vein of expectations, let me also ask you: What if the future of Ascension will depend on you as much as on the interim rector or next rector? Hold that question alongside the main event in today’s gospel story, the Baptism of Jesus. Imagine the ‘*Holy Spirit descend[ing] upon [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove.*’ followed by the confirming voice from heaven.

As prayed in today’s Collect and as we will hear in the remainder of this mass: for two thousand years, Christians have connected the baptism of Jesus to our own baptisms, in which we, also, are claimed as God’s beloved, in which we, also, are anointed by the Spirit. This anointing is not merely some sort of divine sachet. By it our own God-given missions and ministries are to be revealed in and expressed through you, and me, and through our God-given gifts, and in our God-given circumstances.

The ministry of an interim rector here at Ascension and the call of a new rector will no doubt be significant. It’s also true that the ministry of a parish is a ministry of the whole corpus of the congregation, the Body of Christ made visible in who you are and who you aspire to be, how you care for one another, and what you say and do and give, individually and collectively.

In the Baptismal Covenant that we will share in a few moments, I ask you to take part robustly. Answer as if *waiting-with-expectation*. Question how you may be anointed. Imagine your coming moment or season to show up, to weep or laugh with others who are doing so. Imagine being the wise, forgiving, patient or prophetic one, for the good of the whole. Answer as if what lies ahead for the Church of the Ascension will partly rely on you – your expectation, your questioning, your anointing. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> προσδοκῶ - prosdokaō: to await, expect. In today’s gospel, Προσδοκῶντος, prosdokOntos.