

**Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 2023**  
**Baptism of Our Lord - First Sunday after Epiphany**  
**“Jesus Enters It All”**  
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**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**  
**Decorah, Iowa**

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

An image that’s lingering with me as we begin a new year comes from the very first day of 2020. Our extended family was on a beach vacation in Florida after Christmas. Each day started with a walk by the ocean. The morning of January 1<sup>st</sup>, we were delighted to see that someone had used seashells to write the numbers 2020 there on the sand. The digits looked fun and funky and inviting. 2020 here we come.

2019 had been a rough year for my family as we faced some serious health issues for my son. The promise of a new year, a new decade, was most needed and most welcome. 2020 is going to be a great year I remember thinking that morning. It didn’t quite meet my expectations. I remember as 2021 began so many of us expected that year to be drastically different from the hard 2020. But then Jan. 6, 2021 happened.

What do we do with our unmet expectations? How do we live with disappointments? That’s a question I’m holding as we start another new year, a question that our scriptures today also raise.

John the Baptist has high expectations of Jesus who he knows is the Messiah. In the passage right before this one, he says of Jesus, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and ... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John seems to think that Jesus is coming to burn it all down - all the wealth and greed and injustice of Rome. Finally, King Herod and the Emperor are going to get what they deserve. Bring it on. This is going to be a great year.

John stands in a river yelling for everyone to be cleansed, repent, get ready. And just as he’s done speaking, John sees Jesus on the horizon coming towards him. I imagine him turning to the crowd saying, “See what I’d tell ya, here he is now.” Except, his hands are empty - no winnowing forks, no weapons. And he doesn’t look terribly fiery, more curious kid than fierce Messiah. What’s he doing now, walking into the Jordan? He’s the strong one, he’s supposed to change everything! If he gets baptized, he’s going to give away all his power!

John’s expectations of Jesus are left unmet, and not for the last time. Later when John is in prison, I imagine him remembering the words of the prophet Isaiah, words we heard this morning that describe God’s chosen servant bringing prisoners from the dungeon. Alright Jesus, here I am, literally in prison. This is it. This is your time. Could you start acting like a Messiah? Any day now would be great. Jesus doesn’t spring John out of prison. Instead, he is executed there.

What did John do with all his unmet expectations? How did he deal with disappointment? What do we do with this stuff in our own lives each day and as a new year begins? Should we try to manage our expectations so we’re not disappointed? Set the bar low so that we’re always pleasantly surprised by our own efforts, by the people around us?

This week I read a reflection entitled "Giving Disappointment Its Due" by theology professor Jonathan Tran.<sup>1</sup> Tran writes, "We might think disappointment's bad, but it ain't death. [Yet] ... death has everything to do with disappointment. After all, what is death's sting other than the loss of an imagined future?" He continues, "Our society lacks resources for acknowledging disappointment. We have rituals for mourning death but not for disappointment. Instead of acknowledging your disappointment, most people would rather deflect it or explain it away: 'You dodged a bullet' or 'It wasn't in the cards' or even 'That wasn't God's plan'. And, no one avoids acknowledging our disappointment as much as we ourselves do. It hurts too much. It's easier to store up enemies and resentment."

Yet unmet expectations and disappointments are a part of being human. When we deny those parts of our lives, we deny our own humanity. God does not avoid, deflect, or explain away the pain of being human. Instead, God enters into all of it. That day on the Jordan River, Jesus enters the fraught waters of our humanity. He takes on our sin, our disillusionment, all that is disheartening and distressing and death dealing. Jesus wades deep into it, faces it head on. In doing so, Jesus assures us: You can be dripping in this stuff and still be beloved of God.

Not just at the Jordan long ago but now in the waters of our baptism, God meets us in all hard stuff and joins us. We are joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus in baptism. In the waters, we die with Christ and are raised to new life again and again. We can't escape the pain, but God meets us right there. This means, we can face the death dealing disappointments of this life knowing they do not define us, they will not crush us. We will rise again today, tomorrow, each new day.

We can expect good things today and in the year ahead, for even in the midst of death, God is with us and God brings new life. This new life may not look like what we expect, but it will emerge, it will spring forth. It may not always be fun and funky and beautiful beach weather with hope spelled out in seashells, but it will emerge.

And when our expectations are unmet and our hopes dashed, God comes alongside to grieve with us, to call us beloved, to raise us up again. God's presence also allows us to enter difficult waters with others, acknowledging what is hard and looking together for what new life will emerge. God's presence allows us to work for justice over the long haul, even when our expectations are disappointed time and time again.

Today, each new day, hear this word of promise for you.

You are God's beloved child.

God is with you in all that is, all that has been, and all this is to come.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Tran, "Giving Disappointment Its Due", *The Christian Century*, Jan. 2023, 35-36.