

Expecting the Unexpected  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
December 14, 2008

Scripture:  
OT: Psalm 126  
NT: John 1:6-8; 19-28

Remember the “Uncola?”

It was an advertising campaign for the makers of a lemon-lime soft drink who wanted to distinguish their product from the likes of Coke and Pepsi. The idea behind the campaign was that sometimes it is easier to describe what something *is* by defining what it is *not*.

The people at General Motors took the same tack when they wanted to convince young car buyers to stop buying European-made sedans and start buying their product. Remember their campaign: “It’s *not* your father’s Oldsmobile.” It didn’t work and now about the only Oldsmobiles around are the ones our father’s generation drove.

The people who make Hummers had the same idea a few years later, but they were a bit more subtle. They produced an ad that put a twist on nostalgia. I bet you remember it, a soapbox derby at the top of a hill with a winding paved road. Several teams of boys rolled their traditional soapbox cars up to the starting line. Then, to the soundtrack of some loud rock and roll song, a Hummer-like soapbox rolled up to take its place alongside the others.

When the flag dropped, the other cars started winding down the paved road while the Hummer, in all of its macho glory, went off-road and took a direct line down the hill to win the race. The ad conveniently avoided the issue of whether it was a fair victory. All’s fair in love and car sales, I suppose. And we wonder how the American car manufacturers self destructed.

I am sure you can think of your own examples of this idea of expressing what something is by expressing what it is not. It goes beyond the realm of marketing, of course. In fact, here in the South, it has been a way of communicating for centuries.

Call it politeness, or a desire to be genteel or just good old-fashioned southern dysfunction, but it’s part of the unwritten code down here. We southerners have a tendency think we are communicating quite clearly. But, often, people from another part of the country come away having no idea what we really meant. Can I get an “Amen” if you are a transplant and you’ve experienced this?

That doesn’t seem to stop us, though. Sometimes when this way of speaking is taken to the level of an art form, it can be intensely direct, even a little cutting. I had the privilege of working for a number of years with Hugh McColl, who built NCNB and then

NationsBank into what we know now as Bank of America. Mr. McColl is a consummate southerner whose motivation in large part was to build a bank large enough so that southern customers never had to go north for capital.

And he was more than a little competitive. In fact, when he traveled north on business, his southern accent mysteriously got deeper and more noticeable. It was a not-so-subtle reminder to the Yankees and the people from what he once called the one foreign country in which he ever bought a bank, California.

Well, he had this inverted way of speaking down pat. Luckily, it happened only a few times that I can recall, but when I did some work for him that fell short of his expectations, he made himself perfectly clear. "Well, John," he would say, in his drawl, "I wasn't *in love* with it." That meant I'd better start over, and fast, or start polishing my resume.

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We southerners come by this way of speaking honorably because people apparently have doing it for thousands of years. Just take our scripture passage from the Gospel of John about John the Baptist.

The figure of John the Baptist appears in all four gospel accounts of Christ's life on earth. In what we call the synoptic gospels, because of their close similarities, Matthew, Mark and Luke together describe a man who preached in the wilderness of Judea, wearing a camel-hair shirt and leather girdle, eating locusts and honey, calling all to repent and baptizing them in the river Jordan.

He spoke to what Luke calls "multitudes", quoted the prophecy of Isaiah about a savior to come and drew the concern of the Roman officials for the ruckus he was stirring.

In the Gospel of John, however, we have a much more muted image of John the Baptist. In fact, scholars tend not to even call the figure in John's gospel John the Baptist because the author of that gospel draws a much more varied sketch of him.

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," says the character in the Gospel of John, which led scholars to call him not 'John the Baptist' but "John the witness" or simply "the voice."

Whatever we may call him, he uses an inverted way of prophesying the coming of the Lord in his own skillful way. In the account of the fourth gospel that we read a moment ago, the Jews had become concerned about what this man was preaching so they sent priests out from Jerusalem into the wilderness to interrogate him.

"Who are you?" they asked him.

Anticipating their concern that he might be proclaiming his own divinity, John answered the question in the best way he knew how.

“I am *not* the Messiah,” said John.

“Well then,” said the priests, “Are you Elijah?”

“I am *not*,” he said again, saying almost as few words as possible.

“Are you the prophet,” the priests persisted.

“No,” said John, using not only just one word but one syllable.

Now, we men can relate to John’s approach here, can’t we? Why use three words, when one will do? Why say more than the minimum when the minimum will do? Why risk confusion by babbling on unnecessarily?

But, men, does that ever work? Especially with the women in our lives? Ok, so, it’s probably true that we just don’t want to express our emotions and that we often prefer vegetating in silence after a long day, even if that’s not what our spouses or loved ones have in mind.

In the fourth gospel, the minimalist approach to dialogue doesn’t work for John the Baptist any better than it works for us men who tend more toward a quiet approach to domestic life.

The priests come back again. Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates it in his contemporary-language Bible called *The Message*.

“Exasperated, they said, “Who then? We need an answer for those who sent us. Tell us something – anything! – about yourself.... If you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, why do you baptize?”

In response, John the Baptist, the voice, the witness, offers a few more words, but not a lot. And he continues to speak in that inverted manner, drawing a picture of the one who is coming by offering only its outlines rather than filling in all the details.

“Among you stands the one whom you do *not* know,” he says, implying that the presence of Emanuel, God with us, has already arrived in some fashion. “I am *not* worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

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I don’t know about you but the fourth gospel’s less-is-more portrait of John seems to me to be especially fitting this year.

First of all, it's a time when we are all dealing with less, or certainly anticipating having less because of economic conditions. In her newspaper column Friday, the syndicated writer Ellen Goodman wrote that "thrift is the new normal."

That more minimalist approach to life in general has a way of getting us all to think hard about what matters. One Christmas letter I've received said it this way: "We have all, no doubt, lost money in the stock market...(So) this season is a time when we take measure of what we *do* hold onto."

Indeed, we as a society have been overdue, in my opinion, for a lesson about how less can be more. Ironically, what we often find in times like these is how much we actually have. Our friends, our family, our faith, much less our material things. As westerners in a prosperous, developed nation, we have so much and we actually use only a part of it, don't we?

At a recent public forum, I was asked to speak on a panel about the holiday season. But the audience wanted to talk about how our community will cope with the rising number of job losses and the rising need to feed and clothe and house those at the bottom of the economic ladder. We concluded that, as a community, we probably have more than enough to take care of each other. We would only need every household to offer up a few articles of unwanted clothing and to buy a bag of groceries for the food banks.

We've seen that spirit in the emergency fund that Leon Levine and others have organized, raising about \$1.5 million in less than two weeks already. In another sign of hope, it looks like the city and several non-profits intend to find a way to open up the old Hull House uptown to house hundreds of homeless women and children this winter.

It gives a whole new meaning to finding "room in the inn." Let's pray our community can continue to be drawn together and summon this kind of resourcefulness, whether it is in the name of Yahweh or Jesus Christ or Allah or enlightened corporate self interest or community.

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In the end, though, this passage in the Gospel of John frames two questions.

Who are we?

And, in what, really, do we place our hope in this season of Advent and year-round?

In answer to the first question, "who are we?", the best answer we can give is the same one that John the Voice gave that day in Bethany. We are the ones who point away from ourselves to another. We are the ones who proclaim the coming of our lord. In doing so, we relieve ourselves of every burden and every care. We joyfully announce we are not in charge, as our friend Dave Hancock would have us tell everyone we

know. We are children of God, held gently in the caring and loving hands of our creator and called to serve God's will for our lives.

For what, then, do we hope?

Again, we can do no better than to take the perspective of the one who cried out in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan. We hope this season – and throughout our lives as believers - for something that we could never imagine or expect or earn or even fully understand, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source and the sum of our trust and faith.

As John the Voice tried to convey to the priests, that grace, come into the world as a child king, is as radically different from anything we have ever known as light is to darkness, as freedom is to sin, as peace is to worry.

So we wait, as if we have been handed a Polaroid photograph that has been taken but won't develop for eleven more days. God grant us new eyes to behold the image as if we were seeing it for the very first time.

Amen.