

David C. Myers
December 25, 2011
Christmas Day

“Jesus’ Beard”

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:3

Matthew 11:2 – 19

Texts: “See, My servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, . . . Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, . . . nothing is his appearance that we should desire him.”

. . . from Isaiah 52:13-14 and 53:2

“Are You the one Who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

. . . Matthew 11:3

As a young pastor I had some experimental years, those times when I was trying to figure out what I should look like as a pastor. It was then that I grew my first beard. For me – back when my facial hair was very dark – growing a beard was no problem. In just three days there was no doubt about my intentions. I thought I would get a head start on my beard during my summer vacation three years into pastoring my first church. After all, vacation could be a vacation from the daily grind of shaving as well.

When I came back from two week’s vacation I was well on my way with a neat, well-trimmed growth of dark facial hair. I felt older and wiser, and when I smoked my pipe – something I also did in those years when I needed to appear older and wiser – I felt like a philosopher-sage I had once aspired to be.

The congregation, while surprised to the point of shock, for the most part was **outwardly** patient. However, there were some, while either recalling my chronological age or the way they felt about my maturity, suggested that I looked like some college-age radical peace activist. Little did they know, that aside from the age-bit, they were paying me a complement. Others suggested that it was not proper for a minister to have a beard – especially a young, still wet-behind-the-ears minister.

I tried to remind them of Jesus’ beard. Debbie said she liked it. Some of the young children in the church thought I was “cute!”

Then I came across a book by John Molloy entitled, *Dress for Success*. In this annoying, but all too accurate book, Molloy insists, along with many of that congregation (as I later learned – in a bit of after-the-fact evaluation) that beards should be taboo for people who want to make a good impression. Molloy suggest that people who adorn themselves with beards are trying to separate themselves from others; and the more hair, the more separation. He added that his personal tastes are that a beard indicates something “sinister.”

Up until encountering all that heavy, sinister thinking, I only thought I was experimenting with what I would look like. In fact, as I groomed in the privacy of my

bathroom mirror I thought it made me appear wiser and more intelligent (no mean trick), and perhaps even a little bit dashing (that would have taken a true miracle). But I now know, **according to John Molloy**, that in this, the fourth time I have sported a beard, I have only done it because of my sinister intentions in trying to separate myself from others. Let the record show that I do not necessarily agree with John Molloy.

I can only take comfort that Jesus had a beard.

Well, of course, we think Jesus had a beard; we don't know for sure; we don't know if He had a literal growth of facial hair. We would presume so. Gillette and Schick were not among the Fortune 500 companies of ancient Palestine. But Jesus was definitely the beard type; that is, many people were put off by Him; and, as seen throughout His encounters with the establishment, some were certain that He was, as John Molloy put it, "sinister."

Christmas has to do with this beard business; the threat which always seems to reside in the unexpected or different, the surprise. Think about the birth of Jesus; a beard-type of experience if there ever was one. Who would have expected the King of the Jews to be born in a stable, laid in a manger (an animal feeding trough), born to peasant parents and with absolutely no fanfare. As Jesus grew, he merely confirmed the "beard-type" nature of His life; always the unexpected, always what some considered to be "sinister;" and evil meanings were given to the thoroughly lovely things He said and did.

If there is a lesson for us in Christmas, apart from the obvious rejoicing at the Redeemer's birth, it is the need to be open to the unusual, the unexpected. For examples the expected for the Jews would have been:

- If Jesus had been born in a palace with couriers shouting the expected arrival everywhere in the land.
- If He had stayed in the temple with fringes on His prayer shawl.
- If He had been more conventional with who He socialized with and not eaten and stayed with sinners and tax collectors.
- If He had gone to seminary for rabbinical training instead of insisting at age 12 that He knew what it was all about
- If He had fallen into line with the meaning of the Sabbath and its observance.

But the fact that Jesus didn't do those things, Jesus did things in an unexpected way and was thereby rejected by the conventional, by the establishment, by the polite and well-mannered, by those who thought religion was an "appearances only" matter.

Could it be that in the midst of our Christmas celebration that we lose sight of this – of the unexpected nature of the incarnation; both what it meant then and what it means now?

Jesus Himself said that He came into the world not to call the righteous, but to save sinners. It was a shock to the religious establishment of the time that Jesus would eat with the "unworthy" – the tax-collectors, harlots, outcasts and sinner. To the very good and the "righteous ones" Jesus, the man with the beard, was sinister. But to the "unworthy" as so-labeled by the self-righteous, Jesus was a life-giving, affirming Savior.

The ministry of Christ then, and as it goes on today, is one of a double-edged sword. It has been said that the task of faith is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Either way, expectations are shattered. To those who think they have it made, Christ afflicts with a message to love all and humble yourself. To those who are lowly, Christ came to affirm, to set free, and to preach Good News. To the people at the first Nativity Christ came *not* as a royal king, but as the unexpected, as a baby, of human flesh, of humble, peasant parents, born in a stable, laid in a manger which was an animal feeding trough.

Today we have great expectations for the holidays. There is no question that we have clouded the meaning of Christmas – and there is no time or energy to have our expectations shattered or to experience newness. But that is my message this morning – to look for the risky and unexpected and to go beneath the familiar and experience again the revolutionary act of God coming into the world in flesh and blood.

In Matthew's Gospel this morning we read a story about how Jesus broke the expectations of the one who baptized Him, the one who announced His coming. And if there was ever a sinister character, it was John the Baptist! Early on in Jesus' ministry, perhaps a year or so after John the Baptist had baptized Him, we find that John is in prison. And John is wondering about the one he baptized:

“When John the Baptist heard in prison about the things that Christ was doing, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus. “Tell us,” they asked Jesus, “are You the One Who John said is going to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Now, how can Jesus answer this question filled with doubt and uncertainty? How can He shatter the pre-conceived expectation, yet still assure John (and us) that indeed He was the Messiah? What would be a convincing answer? Could Jesus send out a resume? Perhaps complete with some recommendations?

There was only one way to answer the question.

Jesus said, “Go back and tell John what you are seeing and hearing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor.”

In the rich tradition of the Jews Jesus was listing not only what He was doing, but He was reciting the signs of the Messiah. And in Jewish tradition if there were no signs of the Messiah . . . well, then there was no Messiah.

Our expectation may lead us in some direction, but in order to be faithful to the surprising nature of God's incarnation, we need to be ready to have our expectations shattered. Openness and tolerance in the face of that which we do not fully understand prepares the way of the Lord; the Lord Who invariably comes in a beard, if you please, that which often appears sinister. In the final sentence of this section, verse 19, Jesus said,

“the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and other outcasts!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

As was read from Isaiah’s suffering servant section, the great expectations were shattered:

“See, My servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, . . . Just as there were many who were astonished at him – . . . nothing is his appearance that we should desire him.” (from Isaiah 52:13-14 and 53:2)

We Christians have been saved by a grand surprise. To properly celebrate Christmas means that despite our preparations and expectations we had better be ready for a grand surprise or two. And those surprises will take us on a road not yet travelled, to visit those whom we would rather not visit, and to be constantly open and ready for another of God’s great incarnations. It is just a continuation of the shattered expectations of the surprising and amazing grace we first saw in Bethlehem at that most unlikely of birthing rooms – a smelly barn with an animal feeding trough as a crib.