

Fed by Grace | Food in the Gospels

John, the Bug Eater

Mark 1.1-8; Luke 7.20-35

1.12.14

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; ³ THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" ⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶ John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. ⁸ "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

(Luke 7) When the men came to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'" ²¹ At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind. ²² And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. ²³ "Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." ²⁴ When the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ "But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces! ²⁶ "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. ²⁷ "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' ²⁸ "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." ²⁹ When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. ³¹ "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? ³² "They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' ³³ "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!' ³⁴ "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' ³⁵ "Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Usually, during this part of the year, between Christmas and Easter, we look at the "source material" of Christianity, the four authorized accounts of the life of Jesus Christ: The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And, THIS year, once again, we LOOK at these histories through the theme of food: FOOD in the Gospels.

FOOD and EATING and MEALS and FOOD EVENTS (e.g. banquets, weddings) and FOOD PRODUCTION are all used in the teaching of Jesus Christ as metaphors. We all eat so Jesus Christ uses our universal interest in food to relate spiritual truths – eating provides a hook.

We've ALSO seen, that AT food events, Jesus Christ did some of His most significant teaching and relating to others. We are apparently MOST HUMAN when we gather to eat. SO, Jesus Christ frequents these gatherings and deals with the hearts of people when those hearts come out to play...when our humanity is most exposed...at meals.

Today we look at a strange figure who had a strange diet, John the Baptist who ate bugs, "locusts and wild honey". And, HIS diet is contrasted with the diet of Jesus Christ because, their distinct diets were symbolic of their distinct teachings and their missions. John the Baptist drank no wine and ate only rough, unprepared foods (he "lived off the land"). Jesus Christ, on the other hand, ATE prepared foods and DRANK wine and those two diets were emblematic.

Today we look at our expectations about God, about spiritual truth and about life. Those cherished expectations and pre-conceptions are often the things that really get in the way of our spiritual progress and growth... And we'll see that this "bug-eater" AND the so-called glutton and drunkard whom he introduced are the voice of God, if only we can only set aside our expectations and listen to what they're saying.

Let's look at Expectations Examined, Expectations Exchanged and Expectations Exceeded...

I wonder if you've examined YOUR expectations about life. If you're ever disappointed at life or disappointed with God or with yourself or others...where did you get those expectations? And have you even considered how your expectations may be hindering the fuller life that God really has for you?

Some people DO examine their expectations and may determine that they were wrong-headed or too small and they may make mid-course corrections... sometimes in a good way like diet and exercise or taking a class or joining a group. And sometimes in not-so-good ways; e.g. the proverbial mid-life crisis where he buys the red sports car or she announces, "it was never God's will that we get married...") Sometimes college students go away and discover alternative belief systems...decide that their expectations of God and life were "provincial" or narrow.

Last week's sermon used the example of William Wilberforce who is credited with abolishing slavery in Britain (1807) and his story was really about expectations. He became a Christian while a member of Parliament and when he really wanted to serve God he just ...EXPECTED that he was supposed to leave secular life (especially government!) and go to seminary and become a minister.

And the point Jim Belcher made was that God's call is to remain where we ARE...And IN that calling Wilberforce's expectations were wildly exceeded.

So again...what ARE your expectations for this coming year and for your life and HOW are those expectations shaped by forces (like your parents or grandparents or friends or advertisers who depict the American Dream)?

And what about people's expectations about God? ... For instance, if you are a person who has rejected God, tell me about this God you've rejected. Maybe when you describe Him or It, maybe it turns out that I would reject that "god" too. In other words, maybe YOUR expectations of God are not at all in keeping with the God of the Bible and what you've actually rejected is simply the god of your expectations.

In this second passage people are being urged and even pushed to examine their expectations. Look at the six question marks in vv. 24 – 26..."What did you expect?"

In the first text John the Baptist is described in these unusual terms. His diet and appearance are "different". He eats locusts and wild honey (he's living off the land) and dresses in camel-skin. And his MESSAGE sort of follows suit – it's rough and unrefined. He says very straightforward things about people's faults, not "tactful". What he says is Law. If he was a doctor we'd say he had "poor bedside manner" – he just tells it like it is and lets the chips fall.

Some people recognize immediately that they NEED this kind of thing, "we NEED an accurate diagnosis and I'd rather have a doctor who 'tells it like it is' than a doctor who may be very nice but who can't bring himself to tell the hard truth". So, many people go to John, out into the wild to be diagnosed and to be cleansed and make a new start.

But for others...people sort of hung up on appearances and sort of put off by this apparent lack of bedside manner and tact...some people (especially the good and religious people and MOST especially the clergy) some people avoid this Wildman, this bug-eater!. And Jesus Christ asks them (six question marks!) "Well, what did you EXPECT?"

And it turns out that John's appearance and diet were exactly what they should have expected!

Imagine this guy shows up at your place of work...He's dressed in a distinctive brown outfit...light cotton, BROWN with gold embroidery...carrying a box in one hand and a sort of computerized clip-board in his other hand and asking, "I have a box for Joan Smith". And he puts the box on Joan Smith's desk and she starts screaming, "I've never seen this man! How dare you put a box on my desk...I demand an explanation!"

Everyone would be shocked that poor Joan didn't recognize a virtually universally recognized "brand" – this isn't just any man! This is the UPS man! And the UPS man (or woman) is synonymous with the delivery of packages/parcels (United Parcel Service). What did you expect?

And John is wearing his own brown uniform...just as recognizable a "brand" in THAT day...the uniform of a prophet. His food is not processed by humans and his message isn't refined or processed by humans either – it's direct from God.

This generation of religious people – especially the Jewish clergymen and scholars are a "non-PROPHET" organization. It's not that they don't recognize the uniform – it's that they are IN FACT opposed to the Voice of God. They don't need no stinkin' prophet! And when God sent His word by John in the form of Law (austere, direct, diagnostic, pointing to the disease, pointing to SIN, to what RUINS life) you people acted like poor Joan ...you acted like you couldn't recognize a prophet. 'Truth is: YOU expected God to leave you alone because you were so good and sinless.

AND when God is now sending you the ANSWER TO THE LAW, when God sends grace and welcome and mercy in Jesus Christ...when God actually came among you and began to welcome sinners into His holy presence...when God in Jesus Christ ate meals and drank wine with notorious sinners – you once again rejected the Voice of God (now actually the very Person of God!) because you're choked and blinded by your expectations.

You're like Goldilocks, "this porridge is too hot... this porridge is too cold " but you NEVER...EVER get to the one that's just right!

You people are so twisted and spiritually disabled by your expectations...you're like children who have forgotten to how to play the simplest children's games. You play Musical Chairs but you take a seat when the music is still playing and then you keeping

walking around when the music stops. John played a funeral dirge and you didn't weep and I played a jig and you didn't dance.

BUT what gets really interesting here is that NOT only spiritually dead, self-righteous religious people, BUT EVEN SPIRITUALLY ATTUNE, insightful, alive and aware people who really DO KNOW GOD – even prophets can be obstructed and messed up by wrong expectations.

John the Baptist (the greatest of all the prophets because he's the prophet CLOSEST to the Big Event that all the OT prophets awaited) EVEN JOHN HAD HIS PRECONCEPTIONS!

He saw a Messiah – infinitely greater than himself – but who would destroy sin and unrighteousness and injustice and oppression. John expected a Messiah who would destroy all that is wrong and who would accomplish this by JUDGMENT. This Messiah would confront the “powers that be” and have a great reckoning and balance the books.

And when John the Baptist heard that Jesus Christ was spending all His time with powerless folks like fishermen and sick people and widows and sinners and weirdoes (insane people and possessed by spirits) ...and people obviously cursed by God and the poor... and when John the Baptist heard it, he said, “Hmmm...this is NOT what I expected!”

He thought of a Messiah who would cleanse the Halls of Power and instead he was going to the power-LESS. He expected a Messiah who would go BIG...go NATIONAL...even go INTERNATIONAL and kick out those bad Romans... but instead Jesus is spending time with “folks”...just plain everyday people.

Where's the cleansing? Where's the judgment on sin? Where's the fireworks and the expectations?

And Jesus Christ calls even John to EXCHANGE his expectations – to examine them and to see where they fall short. “Look, John the Baptist, the Kingdom of God is breaking IN to this fallen planet. This is what it looks like when evil is thrown down and when God asserts His beautiful reign: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. (Luke 7.22) This is what the Kingdom of God looks like – exchange your expectations!

AND JUDGMENT? ...You won't be here to see it, John (remember, John's in prison about to be executed) but JUDGMENT is about to fall on Jerusalem in a way you never

expected!...And when it falls..I will jump in front of the train...I will take the blame. I will carry all the sins of all My people and I will be judged in their place...

See, John the Baptist, your expectations are only too small and different from how God will actually accomplish His victory. Isaiah and Paul will put it this way, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Corinthians 2.9)

The bottom line of these two passages (literally, last verse) is this, "Wisdom is vindicated by all her children". In other words, it's wisdom to give up our paltry expectations and simply respond to what God is doing. It's wisdom to respond to the dirge and the dance, TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF GOD'S LAW (which John represented) and to see (according to the Law) how we fail to love God and how we fail to love other people. It's wisdom to allow the Law to diagnose our disease (which is more advanced than we expect!) and to respond with weeping, with humility and repentance – to put away our self-righteousness and religiosity. THAT is wisdom!

And it's WISDOM to hear the PIPES – the Piper is come and is playing – THE LORD OF THE DANCE is calling us to join in. He plays an infinitely happy tune.

The Piper is God come to eat with sinners! The Performer is God come to sit and celebrate with BAD PEOPLE like those non-patriotic turn-coats who collected taxes for Rome (and skimmed a little) ...He eats with tax-collectors and prostitutes and people with really bad credit scores...and divorced people...and people who have trouble holding a job...with drinking problems and skeletons in their closets...people who are sexually messed up...God is sitting with difficult people w/o many friends ...and people who wish they were married...and some who wish they weren't...God comes to eat with sinners...

AND...AND...(get ready to stretch here...get ready to exchange old expectations for new...to THINK WAY OUTSIDE THE BOX): BELIEVE IT OR NOT, God, in Jesus Christ, even comes to religious people like second and third and fourth generation Presbyterians who MAY (NOT always...but who **MAY**) think they are better than these other types... God has come to eat and drink with sinners – "This is the Day the LORD has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"