Luke 3:15-22

“Fully Pleased.”

Lowell Streiker was one of the speakers at the Austrian/German conference of Smith’s Friends, which is an evangelical church movement. The event was at Hessenhofe Germany, and Streiker delivered his sermon with the help of an interpreter. Streiker had prepared his notes on his laptop computer, which he placed on the lectern in front of him. Everything was going very well, until the computer just simply froze.

Streiker said to the audience, “Just a minute, my computer is acting up. So just sit quietly and love one another. As he worked to correct the problem, he could hear the translator repeating his words in German. As the translator finished his remarks, the audience erupted in pandemonious laughter.

It was a full year later that Streiker finally learned why they had reacted as they did. A friend of his who was at the conference, and from Austria, finally explained the mystery. It seems in his effort to translate Streiker’s words he said to the group, “to sit quietly and make love to one another.” (A Treasury of Humour, p.170) Talk about getting lost in the translation.

Have you noticed in reading the Gospel’s how often Jesus’ words or actions are misunderstood? Sometimes even though Jesus spoke Aramaic, the common language of the day, people were left scratching their heads. In our gospel lesson today, we encounter another experience of people getting very excited about something about to happen, but not quite catching onto the true significance of these events.

First of all, you need to know something of the heart of the Jewish people in these days. The general population was in a heightened level of excitement and anticipation. Anticipation that the Messiah was finally about to arrive. This anticipation of the coming Messiah was something that waxed and waned from time to time in Israel’s history, but in Luke 3 it is so high that the populace was almost giddy.

The reason for their excitement was fueled by a couple of reasons. One reason was the Israelites’ absolute exhaustion at being the subjects of a pagan empire. For hundreds of years they had gone from one occupier to another. The conditions of life under the occupations did not change much, only the name of the overlord changed. “Enough was enough” they cried out.

The other reason they were so excited was that the people were obviously looking for some sign, some indication that the arrival of the Messiah was at hand. So, into this heightened expectation, there arises a prophet unlike any Israel had ever seen, and certainly unlike one they had seen for hundreds of years. It was as if God had become silent for a long time, and now suddenly he had something to say.

Added to the excitement, was the odd behavior of this prophet. John the Baptizer as he was called, dressed oddly, ate funny food, and spoke without any restraint.

So open and blunt was his speech that he even ticked off King Herod Antipas who had him arrested and eventually killed. Although, as you might remember it was his wife Herodias who tricked Herod into killing John. The point is that no one for a long time had spoken so boldly, or acted so differently from the organized religion. Perhaps others wanted to but they were afraid; afraid of repercussions.

In many ways John became a spectacle as well as a prophet. People came from all around, out into the wilderness, to see this camel haired clad prophet, and to hear what he might say next. It is kind of like much of the fascination with Presidential candidate Donald Trump. I think a lot of people are tuning in to listen to him just to see what outrageous thing he will spew next.

John was so different, and yet so prophetic; meaning his words were so full of godly truth that cut deep into people. People were convicted of their sin, and longed to get right with God. Even tax collectors and soldiers came and asked what they should do. So popular was John that speculation began to arise that perhaps he was the Messiah or chosen one. People began to see him not as the forerunner but as the main event.

“Could it be?” the people wondered. “Could this John the Baptizer be the Messiah?” Eventually someone who had been observing John asked the obvious question that was on everyone’s mind. “Are you the Messiah?” When the question was first asked of him, I am sure you could have heard a pin drop. “This is it! Here it comes!” But those who were expecting the main event through John, were to receive good news and bad news.

The bad news was that despite appearances, and interpretations of observers, John was not the Messiah. “Ah, shucks! We were so hoping!” But, there was good news. The people had every reason to be excited, and to be full of anticipation, because the Messiah was coming, and in fact was near upon the people. His arrival though, would not be a spectacle like John baptizing with water, but his arrival will be one of judgment.

John refers to the Holy Spirit coming, and sifting the people like wheat being sifted from chaff. The dross, the waste, the uselessness of human life: was about to cleansed away. John is saying that he is but the herald pointing to the main event about to come. John is the poster hanging up on the wall saying “Come and see this great thing about to happen!” We read on further that just as John predicted, Jesus came to the Jordon, and was baptized by John, commencing his ministry. The main event was here.

And just as happens with all major events, here too we see that the advertising diminished once the event began. The Gospel of John chapter 3 verse 30-31 records John saying this in response to some expressed jealousy his disciples had over Jesus’ popularity. “He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth, but he has come from heaven.”

John, the anointed prophet, the forerunner, is eventually arrested by Herod and the parade is over. The camel clad prophet is no more.

The spectacle in the wilderness has come to an end, and so here in lays the deep question coming out of this experience. “What did people do when John was no more? When the spectacle was over what happened? We know that some did eventually find their way to Jesus, but I am sure that many simply turned around and went home. They went home having been entertained, having their expectations piqued only to see it end.

It was a great show, very interesting, very informative and very prophetic; but it is now over. What might surprise us, is that some, who followed Jesus, after seeing John, were somewhat disappointed. John himself was even disillusioned, sending his disciples to inquire whether Jesus really was the one. Some heard Jesus’ words and he obviously had good things to say, but they kind of missed the camel hair prophet, and the wrinkly skin from being baptized.

Despite John’s best efforts, people were more attracted to the novelty of what he was doing, than they were to the substance he represented. The words John spoke were really nothing new. They were often quotes right out of Scripture. Words heard many a time in the temple and synagogues, but John put on quite a show. Jesus, on the other hand, seemed to almost shun the public spotlight, asking people to keep quiet about what he had done and what they had seen. John was bold, brash and a real character.

Jesus was constantly being asked to perform some miracle, to put on a show so to speak, but he often refused such bold requests. You see, both John and Jesus encountered an aspect of human nature that is still alive and well today; maybe even more so today. What people want, even in their religious experience: is novelty, spectacle, something to draw the crowds in.

There is of course nothing wrong in being innovative in trying to reach others for Christ, but what are we selling? Jesus called people to the Kingdom of God. He brought the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit. That’s the main event; not the miracles, or the funny clothes that John wore. The hard reality is that when Jesus calls us to: pick up our cross, die to ourselves, love our enemies, and many other hard things, we would rather just see the show.

What, if we have any excitement at all, are we eager about? What fuels our expectation? In our Christian journey what do we long for, what draws our attention? I consider this a vital question in our spiritual walk. Fueling this in my mind is one of the interesting tidbits of conversation I have had recently, and many times over the years, that have to do with observations, and questions about unusual and new things going on in church services.

Sometimes people laugh about what they have observed, or heard, and sometimes they are angry and sometimes they are very saddened. One of the reactions I personally have to all of this is that for some churches the novelty has become the end goal. They have seen their primary mission as presenting worship, or programs, in a way that garners attention. In other words, they want a spectacle. The focus moves away from substance and the message, to the catchy delivery.

As Marshall McClewan once said, “The medium is the message”. In churches, the danger arises that what we value most is the medium. In our worship, we regularly use words we often use when we evaluate entertainment. “That was boring. That was poorly presented. That wasn’t what was in the program/bulletin. I wonder what is going on at the other church/channel. I can’t wait to get this over so I can get on to something more interesting, or more stimulating.”

The danger in seeing novelty as the end game is that people come to see the novelty as the important thing. They begin to assess the value of their worship, and ministry experience, by how it makes them feel, or how entertained they are, not on what truth or substance they have encountered. Therefore, Jesus’ message of judgment, of wheat being sifted, is exchanged for spectacle.

It is very easy to figure out when novelty has replaced substance. Just ask yourself what you remember after the service. Is it a biblical truth that stretched you, or the production value of the service? Do you remember meeting Jesus, or being entertained? Do you remember the Word made flesh, or the package it was delivered in? It kind of reminds me of the experience some parents have of buying that special gift for their child only to have the child more interested in the box it came in?

In relation to this is the observation that we are in great danger of remaining immature in our faith do to our spiritual laziness. The call of Christ to the hard things of faithful living, can easily be forgotten, or covered up by the demand to be wowed. Our efforts to only appear faithful, are really avoidance mechanisms, to take a pass on those demands of our faith that stretch us, or make us sacrifice comfort.

However, the greatest temptation before us that hinders our maturing in Christ maybe our love of excuses. Excuses about how we cannot serve God. Dan Chun, who pastors the First Presbyterian Church in Honolulu tells a wonderful story of a teenager who lost his left arm in a horrendous automobile accident. For several weeks the boy was very depressed, until one day he came to his father with a request.

He told his father he would like to learn Judo, because Judo was something you could do with only one arm. The father eager to cheer up his son readily agreed and secured a sensei to instruct him. The young man went for lessons three times a week, and while he learned basic judo movements, most of his lesson time was focused on learning one specific move that the sensei insisted the boy learn perfectly.

After a couple of months, the judo teacher announced to this young man that he was going to be entered into a tournament. The teenager responded with surprise. “Sensei,” he exclaimed, “I’ve only been taking Judo for a couple of months. I only know one move very well, and I have only one arm. I don’t think I am ready for a tournament. But the sensei insisted and the young man reluctantly agreed.

The day of the tournament arrived, and to the young man’s surprise, he made his way through the first round and then the second and then the third.

He could not believe his success. What ultimately surprised him was that he made it to the finals. Confronting the state champion, he was sure he was going to be destroyed, but to his amazement he not only survived but he was victorious. On the drive home, the young man turned to his sensei and said, “I don’t understand this, Sensei. I have been taking Judo lessons for only two months. I know only one move and I have only one arm. My left arm is gone and I just beat the state champion.

Sensei, how is this possible?” The sensei responded with great dignity, “You have won for two reasons. First, the one move you know well is the most effective move in all of Judo. The second reason you won is because the only effective defense against that move is to grab your opponents left arm.” (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 178)

What excuse are you hanging onto that is holding you back from the full experience of Christ? Is it not time to see it for what it really is, because it is nothing. The Apostle Paul wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” How many things can we do? A few things? Some things? I am pretty sure he said all thing. When the heavens opened that day at the Jordon and God said, “This is my Son with whom I am well pleased”, it was a recognition of Jesus total surrender and commitment to God.

Wouldn’t it be great if the same thing could be said of us?