

December 15, 2019
3rd Sunday of Advent
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Advent: What Do We Expect?

Matthew 11:2–11 (NIV84)

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” ⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What are your expectations for Christmas this year? Maybe you’ve been dropping hints all year for a certain gift and you really expect to see that gift on Christmas morning. Maybe you are expecting people to visit. Maybe you are expecting a bonus from your employer. Maybe you are expecting joy and happiness. And maybe some or all of these expectations will be met.

However, if your expectations were wrong, you might be disappointed. If I expect to see a new vehicle with a bow on it in my driveway on Christmas morning, I am likely to be disappointed. If a snowstorm prevents your loved ones from visiting, you might be disappointed. If sad memories or events interrupt your celebration of Christ’s birth you might not experience the joy and happiness you wanted. Sometimes our expectations do not match with what really happens.

The people at the time of Christ had expectations about the Savior but they were often mistaken. They also had some expectations about John the Baptist and were also mistaken. As we look at the interaction between John’s disciples and Jesus, we ask ourselves during this season of Advent, “What Do We Expect?”

Expectations About John

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

John the Baptist was chosen from before his birth to be the one to announce that the Savior had arrived. John was chosen to prepare the way for Jesus by convicting people of sin and pointing them to the Lamb of God who forgives the sin of the world. John was set apart as a prophet who was not to drink alcohol and instead to live an ascetic life with ragged clothing and eating the food of the wilderness, locusts and wild honey. John faithfully obeyed God, proclaimed God’s Word, and lived without many of the nice things in life. What would you expect if you had such a special calling and fulfilled your calling as John did? Maybe someone would notice and thank you. Maybe you would get to live out your years in peace.

Maybe people would even honor you.

John got thrown into prison. King Herod had taken his brother's wife as his own wife. John faithfully told Herod that this was a clear violation of God's law. Herod and his new wife were not happy to be called sinners and put John in prison. In a short time the daughter of Herod's new wife, his niece and now step-daughter, danced for him. So he promised her anything and she asked John's head on a platter. Prison and beheading is what John received for his faithfulness. This is not what we would naturally expect.

We would like to expect a decent life if we are faithful to God and his Word. But God has not promised this correlation. It is an errant expectation and can lead to doubts about God and his love. "I go to church every Sunday so why aren't things better in my life?" "I don't go out drinking every night like my coworkers so why are they getting the promotions?" "I don't talk about all the bad things or use the bad words my classmates do so why do they seem to have better lives than me?" These kinds of questions show that we have the wrong expectations of being a believer. Faith does not lead to an easy life. Faith in Christ gives eternal life.

Now Jesus addressed the others in the crowd about their expectations of John.

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?"

John had become well known and people went out to see and hear him from all over the region. But what did they expect to hear from John? Some may have gone with the expectation that John would confirm their own views. John preached repentance and some may have wanted to hear John really go after the sinners, the tax collectors, the soldiers and all the really bad people out there. It makes us feel good about ourselves to hear that there are lots of really bad sinners out there. But if they or we go to hear God's Word with the expectation that the law only applies to others, we are mistaken.

Maybe the Pharisees went to hear John, hoping he would take their side in the disputes with the Sadducees, or the other way around. Did they expect to be able to sway John to their side? John was not about to be swayed from the Word of God. He would not bend or compromise on what God said. Sin is sin and Jesus is the only Savior who will take away sin.

Or maybe some just went to be entertained by this preacher in the wilderness. They heard he was a powerful preacher and wanted the experience for themselves. Some today may have the mistaken expectation that going to church is supposed to entertain them, that they show leave with the same feeling as when they leave a good movie or play or concert. But John did not entertain. He proclaimed the powerful Word of God in truth to convict sinners that they desperately need the Savior.

Jesus addresses another wrong expectation of those who went to see John.

If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

Surely John's attire did not impress many people. Camel's hair and a leather belt. If John really wanted to show how he was favored by God, he should have the finest of clothes. He should have a chariot waiting for him to take him back to his palace when his preaching is done. If he is such an important messenger, he should look the part. That is the expectation of the world. And sometimes that faulty

expectation can creep into our thinking.

“Look at how that congregation is growing...they must be doing something right for God to bless them.”
“Look at how that congregation is shrinking...they must be doing something wrong.” “That congregation has a beautiful building with huge stained glass windows and fine architecture...God must be pleased with them.” “That congregation rents an old auto mechanic shop for worship...God must not be pleased with what they are doing.” When we judge faithfulness to God and his Word based on numbers or outward appearances we have false expectations of what faithfulness means.

John’s appearance tells us something. It tells us not to look at him. The message he proclaimed is most important. A beautiful sanctuary in which people are told that they must do something to earn heaven has little beauty. An old garage where Christ and his forgiveness are proclaimed has great beauty for the message is most important.

John’s message always pointed to Jesus as the Christ. John pointed his hearers to the only Savior from sin. Yet, when his disciples meet Jesus, some of them do not see what they expected of the Messiah in Jesus.

Expectations About Jesus

They asked Jesus, *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* ⁴ Jesus replied, *“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”*

Earlier John’s disciples had questioned why Jesus and his disciples didn’t fast like John and his disciples. They were looking for a Savior very much like John. But Jesus was not fasting. While John did point to forgiveness through the Savior to come, much of his message was ‘fire and brimstone’ preaching. Jesus may have seemed soft on sin to John’s disciples with his message of forgiveness and his willingness to associate with known sinners. Matthew, the author of our gospel for today was one of them since he was a tax collector.

Shouldn’t Jesus, the Savior, only associate with those who take the Word of God seriously and try to conform their lives to the Word? True followers of Jesus won’t enjoy life while there are still people living in opposition to God, will they? Again, these are wrong expectations.

Jesus talked to, touched and associated with the blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead and the poor. How could these people fast and act like they were sad when Jesus healed them. When someone who has never walked is suddenly able to walk and run and jump, does he say somberly, “Thank you” and calmly walk home? No. He runs and jumps and shouts his thanks to God and to Christ for healing. Jesus brought great joy to those he healed, not only because they could see, hear, walk and live but also because they could rejoin the worship life of Israel. Their injury, deformity, or disease kept them from going to the temple or synagogue. Now they could go!

Do we sometimes expect that following Jesus is going to make life boring and dull? Or maybe think we should be somber all the time and walk around with our heads down? Certainly, we must consider ourselves the poor, blind, lame, deaf and dead in sin. For that is who Jesus came to save. But we have to rejoice...because Jesus did come to save us. He opened our ears to hear his Word and we rejoice to hear

that he forgives us every sin. By grace he made us alive even when we had been dead in sins. When we were blinded by unbelief, he restored our sight to see and believe that he died and rose to forgive us and give us life eternal. And when we were poor, he traded places with us. For Christmas tells us how the Son of God gave us the riches of heaven to become poor, giving up even his life, so that we can receive the riches of faith, forgiveness and eternal life. We have to rejoice.

The Advent candle we lit today is pink instead of purple. The purple reminds us to prepare and to repent. The pink or rose tells us that this Sunday is different. It is the Sunday of joy, the Sunday to rejoice. In the old language of the church it is called Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday.

So it is fitting that we love to sing this refrain all during Advent and especially on this third Sunday of Advent:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to you, O Israel!

Amen.