

“Great Expectations”
July 23, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4
Matthew 11:1-11

“When John heard in prison what the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

It is said that negative expectations produce negative results. And positive expectations—well, positive expectations also produce negative results.

You know what that’s like.

Show up at an event not wanting to be there, expecting to be bored, and you probably will be. But go with high hopes for what will happen and you’ll probably find that your great expectations were not met. “Well, I expected that” and “Well, I didn’t expect *that*” can both expressions of disappointment.

The problem is that our expectations can get in the way of what we might otherwise hear and see.

Consider the experience of John the Baptist.

You might remember John’s story. Or if you have taken my advice and started reading through all of the Gospel according to Matthew, you recently encountered some of John’s story at the beginning of Matthew.

John must have been quite a sight. Matthew says that John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey—he was not one for polite company even in those days.

The title we give John tells us much of what we need to know about him: John the Baptist. He was known for what he did—baptizing people, dunking them into the River Jordan.

John’s message is the same one that Jesus gives to his disciples when he sends them out to announce the good news to all the towns and villages: “The realm of heaven has come near.”

And like Jesus, John is not talking about “heaven” as someplace where all good people will go when they die if they just do this or believe that. John’s message is *good news* about life here and now.

The realm of heaven is the new reality that is seen in an end to exile, the defeat of evil, and the presence of God with God’s people. Even as John speaks, God’s rule is being established in the world that God created and loves.

Because of this, what we do matters. How we act matters now and it matters for the realm of heaven that is being established on earth.

Because how we live matters, John adds one more word to his message: “Repent.” Change what you’re doing so that it looks more like God’s desire for you and for this world.

That message seems to work for a lot of people. John gathers quiet a following.

Then the religious leaders come to check him out. He calls them a “brood of vipers” and sends them packing. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance,” he tells them—show that you’ve actually changed—or don’t come around here bothering me anymore.

John has great expectations. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” he screams at everyone in earshot. “But one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Then one day Jesus shows up at the Jordan River. John is absolutely certain that this is the One for whom he has been waiting. This is the One who will usher in the realm of heaven. John knows that Jesus so fits his expectations of this fire-baptizing, chaff-burning One, that he is reluctant to baptize Jesus. Why would he need to repent?

John knows he is not worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals. But when Jesus says it’s OK, well, who’s going to argue?

John has great expectations and on this day at the Jordan it is obvious to him that Jesus meets all of them. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, sent as Isaiah said, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, *and* the day of vengeance of our God.” The realm of heaven is near. Soon the axe of God will fall hard upon the fruitless trees. Soon the fire of judgment will burn hot.

A little while later John’s message reaches Herod, who is living with his brother’s wife. Repent. Turn in a new direction. Herod, of course, is unable to turn or unwilling to turn.

And John winds up in prison. We probably could have expected this. The common people love John. He is a problem to the ruling authorities.

In prison, John hears what Jesus is doing. And what he hears gives him second thoughts.

John asked: “Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?”

Jesus said: “Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.”

John ate locusts and wild honey in the wilderness.

Jesus came into the towns eating and drinking—and with the worst type of people at that.

John told the people the end was near.

Jesus announced that a new beginning was even nearer.

Jesus cures the sick, heals the broken, and sends his followers out to do the same. He tells the people, “Do not judge.” “Ask and it shall be given.”

John had recognized that Jesus was God's anointed one—the Messiah, the Christ. But this Messiah is doing the unexpected. No one in the first century expected the Messiah to be a healer. And while it was still in the future, certainly no one expected God's anointed would be crucified.

But here is Jesus: instead of bringing John's fiery judgment, he brings God's compassion, mercy, and healing.

Here is Jesus: never living up to our expectations for him.

It must have been all too much for poor John in that miserable prison cell.

So, John sends *his* disciples to ask Jesus: “*Are* you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?”

John is speaking here, not so much as a prophet, but as a representative of all people—including us. “Should *we* wait?”

We might imagine John thinking: “Jesus, you are just not living up to my expectations.”

We can *certainly* imagine ourselves saying: “Jesus, you're not living up to ours.”

Why is Jesus never like we want him to be, never like what we expect him to be?

Finding that Jesus doesn't fit our own image, we go looking for something more to our liking. And there's always something or someone out there that promises to be more to our liking.

It is only by a tenuous grasp that we hold onto our faith. We look around. We listen to the voices of those who seem smarter or better off or just *better* than we are. We look and listen and wonder: Should we wait for another?

Some use science—or what they *call* “science”—to tell us that the universe in which we live came into being on its own; that life here got started somehow out of no particular purpose; that we are, in the end, just a mass of selfish genes looking to perpetuate ourselves and altruism is a fiction. Why then would we affirm that we are created in the image of God and seek to live in ways that bring out that image in ourselves and others? Why would we follow this Jesus who tells us to love as we have been loved, who encourages us in all things to do to others as we would have them do to us?

The radical capitalists tell us that there are only makers or takers; that compassion is a sign of weakness and only creates weakness in others; that the successful are self-made and invite us into that kingdom of self-made success. Why then would we follow this Jesus who says that a core sign of the coming of God's realm was that the poor have good news preached to them? Should we go along when he tells us: “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you”?

My guess is that each one of us here today knows someone—probably several people—whose lives are examples of goodness, kindness, generosity, mercy, love, or just general human decency who have no connection to a church or who are adherents of no religion at all. We all have friends who have taken a pass on this whole Christianity thing. We wonder if we've made a big mistake. Maybe some other religion—or no religion at all—would set us on the right course.

Maybe we, too, should look for a better deal, something more to our liking, something that better meets our expectations. Why then would we follow this Jesus who tells us: “Take up the cross and follow me”?

Should we wait for another? It is the question that that John asks. It is the question that we ask because it is the question that is asked by people of faith.

As usual, Jesus does not give a straight-up, yes-or-no answer. Jesus calls John—and us with him—to set aside our expectations and instead remember what we have heard as well as what we have seen—and as you are discovering as you read through this Gospel, in Matthew hearing always precedes seeing.

What we have heard:

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Have no fear.

What we have heard is the word of life, a word that is gently and persuasively calling us toward the realm of God as it draws near to us, as it takes shape with us, around us, and through us.

What we have seen:

The blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, and the dead being raised;

The destroyed cities being rebuilt;

The arc of history bending slowly but inexorably toward justice;

The captives being released, the hungry being fed, the homeless being sheltered—even in our midst, even with our help.

What we have seen are signs that our waiting is over, that God is indeed with us, with this broken and weary world.

Of course we will doubt.

Of course we will question.

Of course we will wonder if any of it makes sense.

We are Christians, after all, people of *faith*—not certainty. But your faith and the commitments that grow out of it are neither misplaced, misguided, nor mistaken.

Listen!

Look!

What we hear and see tells us and shows us that the way we have chosen, while not always easy, not always certain, is a way that participates in God's creative and redeeming power, a way that makes the love of God real in this world.

Set aside your expectations.

Be done with your waiting for another.

Continue to love.

Continue to live in the hope that does not disappoint.

Continue to do all the great things and all the small things you do that tell the world the realm of God is near.