

“What Do You Expect?”  
February 1, 2026

Isaiah 61:1-4  
Matthew 11:2-6

“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*” are both expressions of disappointment.

Our expectations influence how we listen and how we see.

Consider the experience of John the Baptist.

You might remember John’s story. He’s been on the edges of the Gospel lessons that we’ve heard on recent Sundays. First, we heard that John baptized Jesus. Last Sunday we heard that: “When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.”

John was arrested? How did that happen?

In the wilderness, John cries out: “The realm of heaven has come near!” Jesus gives his disciples the same message when he sends them to announce the good news to all the towns and villages.

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.

The realm of heaven is not so much a place as a new reality. It is seen, as Isaiah announces, in an end to exile, the defeat of evil, and the presence of God with God’s people. Even as John speaks, God’s realm is being established in the world that God created and loves. This is *good news* about life here and now.

By faith, we recognize that, because God’s reign is coming into this world, 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. With that message, 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 changed—or don’t come around here bothering me anymore.

Luke's Gospel expands this story. In Luke, John calls *everyone* who comes out to see him a brood of vipers—not just the religious leaders. That always makes me feel a little less lonely. When the people ask what they should do, John tells them: “Whoever has two shirts must share with those who have none, and whoever has food must do the same.” Show your repentance by loving your neighbor.

When soldiers of the occupying Roman Empire ask: “What are we to do?” John replies: “No bullying; no blackmail; make due with your pay.”

Preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, John has great expectations. “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” John says. “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 certain that this is the One who will usher in the realm of heaven. Jesus fits John's expectations of the fire-baptizing, chaff-burning One.

John has great expectations. On this day at the Jordan, it is obvious to him that Jesus meets all of them. Certainly, Jesus is the 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—Repent. Turn in a new direction—reaches the brutal and corrupt King Herod, who is living with his brother's wife. As is often the case with the rich and powerful, Herod is unable to turn or unwilling to turn.

So, John winds up in prison.

We probably could have expected this. The common people love John in spite of his harsh message—or perhaps *because* his demanding message offers the promise of life. But he is a problem to the religious leaders. He is a problem to the occupying forces. He is a problem to the ruling authorities.

And this is where we came in this morning.

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 merciful.”

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.

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

Here is Jesus, with his talk of going along for the extra mile with those occupying soldiers, of loving your enemies.

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 speaks here, not so much as a prophet, but as a representative of all people—including you and me. "Should *we* wait?"

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

We *certainly* can imagine ourselves saying: "Jesus, you're not living up to *our* expectations."

So often, Jesus is not like what we want him to be, not like what we expect him to be.

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

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 tell us that we are, in the end, just a mass of selfish genes looking to perpetuate ourselves; that 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?

Some tell us that there are only makers or takers; that empathy and compassion are signs of weakness and only create weakness in others; that the successful are self-made and who invite us into the 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 is 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, who are adherents of another faith or 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 your cross and follow me"?

Should we wait for another? John asks this question. We ask this question, because people of faith ask this question.

As usual, Jesus does not give a straight-up, yes-or-no answer. Jesus calls John—and us along with him—to set aside our expectations and remember what we have heard as well as what we have seen.

This is 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 gently and persuasively calls us toward the realm of God as it draws near to us, as that new reality takes shape within us, around us, and through us. This word calls to us in the face of the danger and uncertainty and evil that have become all too familiar.

This is what we have seen:

The arc of history bending slowly but inexorably toward justice;

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

The people of Minnesota showing bravery and the power of diversity and a steely resolve in the face of violence—as Bruce Springsteen sings:

Against smoke and rubber bullets  
In the dawn's early light  
Citizens stood for justice  
Their voices ringing through the night.

We have heard and seen signs that our waiting is over, that God is indeed with this broken world. We have heard and seen the good news that sin is forgiven—yes, even *our* sin; all that separates us from God, from one another, and from the good in ourselves has been overcome. We have heard and seen the power of the resurrection.

Of course we will doubt.

Of course we will question.

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

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

Listen!

Look!

What we hear and see tells us and shows us that the way of Jesus Christ, 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 waiting for another.

Continue to love as you have been loved in Christ.

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.