

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA December 15, 2013

Matthew 11:2-6

Setting Expectations: Personal Preference or Scriptural Reference?

1. **Life is built on Expectations**
2. **A Biblical Example**
3. **Christ is Coming**
4. **Jesus says...**

Hymns: "Come To Us Emmanuel"
17 – 14 – 12 – 26 – 8 – 5 (vv.1-4)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples³ 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 Matthew 11:2-6

Much of what we do in life is built on expectations. If you apply yourself in the classroom growing up, you expect to get good grades. If you work hard in your job, you expect to find success. If you love, you expect to be loved in return. But what happens when those expectations are not met? The result is often disappointment; depression; anger; doubt.

Today, we are going to see that it was no different for the man who is called the greatest prophet in the Bible. As we look to Matthew 11 and an exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus, we will see where Jesus points us when setting our expectations.

Though we are preparing for Christ's coming, the Gospel for the 3rd Sunday in Advent actually takes us past the Savior's birth in Bethlehem, past his childhood, and into the early part of his earthly ministry, which began when he was about 30 years old.

At this point, John the Baptist's ministry of preaching repentance and preparation in the wilderness had already been brought to an end.

He had told many, many people to "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near." He had pronounced the stern message of the law for unbelievers, that "the ax was at the root of the trees, the winnowing fork was in hand, the unquenchable fire was ready to burn the chaff." He had already announced that very soon, "One greater than he would come whose sandals he was unworthy to tie." He had pointed to Jesus in the flesh saying, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." John had even baptized Jesus himself in the Jordan River while hearing God the Father thunder approvingly, "This is my Son, whom I love!"

John believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One who was to come from God. And John had clearly set some expectations in regards to what he would see Jesus accomplish in his ministry. John expected, like we have seen from many, that Jesus would come and provide immediate and visible changes. John expected that Jesus would build on the momentum of the message that he had been proclaiming on the banks of the Jordan River. Jesus would come and swiftly judge the unbelieving people of Israel, and he would establish the Kingdom of God here on earth. The people, especially the Jewish leaders, who scoffed at his message of repentance, would be shown quickly how wrong they were, and John and those who believed his message would be rewarded for their faith.

Yet, that isn't what was happening at all. After being pointed to as the Lamb of God and being baptized in the Jordan, Jesus did begin his ministry. But it didn't meet human expectations. He selected ordinary men to be his companions and helpers. And he travelled through the land of Northern Israel where he grew up, and embarked on a ministry of mercy. He healed the sick, he gave sight to the blind, he made the lame walk. And his message was mercy too. He spoke a new message of "good news," and the people flocked to him in droves.

However, unrepentant sinners were not being swept away in judgment. Axes were not chopping down haughty religious leaders from their positions of prominence. Kingdoms were not being established, as Jesus was working around insignificant Galilee, far away from the religious and political center of Jerusalem. And John? John the great prophet WAS sitting in prison.

We are told that this affected John the Baptist. Our text tells us that, "**When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or**

should we expect someone else?" You can hear it John's voice, can't you? As John sat in prison, he began to have doubts. John the Baptist, the second Elijah, the great prophet sent specifically to prepare the way for the Lord, was struggling with disappointment. The one who stood, and pointed emphatically at Jesus while proclaiming, "Look, the Lamb of God!" was questioning what God had told him.

It certainly isn't what we would expect from John. But it shows us that not even the greatest among men was exempt from doubts about his Savior. Even John was not perfect in his expectations of what Jesus' coming meant for him. And that was really the problem, wasn't it? John had set his expectations of the Christ according to his own personal preferences of what he wanted. He wanted Jesus to win the victory right away. He wanted the Kingdom to come immediately. He wanted his own ministry, which had been cast aside as crazy talk by a crazy man, to be vindicated. And when he wasn't seeing what he expected... It is an ugly scene when expectations are set according to personal preference.

Yet, even in the midst of his doubts and disappointment, look at what John did. Rather than giving up on his faith based on what he was seeing, or wallowing in despair because of his troubling circumstances, John went to Jesus for the answers. And Jesus gave him the answer, in a noteworthy way.

Jesus replied, ***"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 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."***

In front of his disciples and the large crowd, Jesus could've rebuked John for his misguided expectations and his lack of faith. He also could have given him a direct answer, "I am the One who was to come." But he did neither. Instead, what did Jesus do? Through his words, he gently pointed John and his disciples and the crowd away from their own personal preferences as to who and what the Messiah would be, and referred them back to the Scriptures to find their answers and strengthen their faith.

By pointing to the very work that John was questioning, Jesus was referring to Isaiah the prophet who said that about what would happen when the Messiah came: ***"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the***

desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow" (Isaiah 35:5-7). Scripture told John, it told Israel, it told us, that when the Messiah came, human expectations would not be met, the unexpected would happen. Jesus made the blind see, he opened the ears of the deaf, he restored the strength of the lame, he made the mute sing for joy. He also made the dead alive, and he delivered a message that flowed into people's deserted, burning hearts as the Water of Life. Jesus' work there in Galilee fulfilled the words of the prophets; it showed that he was the Messiah, the all-powerful Son of God.

But most importantly, Jesus' work there in Galilee was reuniting people with God. And that should've been the biggest proof to John that he should not doubt. John wanted Jesus to establish his kingdom and that is exactly what he was doing, one soul at a time, amongst the poor and sick and helpless. In Israel, those who were blind, deaf, disabled, diseased, they were excluded from temple worship. In effect, they were excluded from God. As Jesus healed, he provided physical restoration, but more than that, he provided spiritual restoration. John could rejoice and be confident that God was keeping his promises. Jesus truly was the Messiah that the Scriptures told John and the rest of Israel to expect. But to see that, they needed the foundation of their expectations to be set in the right place, not on what they wanted, but what the Word of God stated.

That brings it to us, who need to be asking, "What is the foundation for our expectations?" Our expectations of Christ; our expectations for our Christian lives; our expectations for our Christian church; how do we set them? Christmas is an opportune time for us to talk about our Christian expectations, because Christmas, like life, is built on expectations.

It is very easy during this Christmas season to build our expectations on what we want. Who of us doesn't dream of the perfect, postcard Christmas in our heads: the whole family happily gathered around the tree, surrounded by gifts, the fire warming us inside as snow falls outside, singing our favorite Christmas carols, not giving thought to any of the cares of life? But reality? Reality brings dissension in the family, stress from the workplace, worry about the finances; and the result is that Christmas can turn into a stressful, hectic time that burns us out and leaves us

disappointed because it is never quite perfect like we would want it to be.

However, if we build our expectations for Christmas on Scripture? Then all we expect on Christmas is a Savior to be born. All we want is someone to take away our sins, and give us relief from our worries and problems. All we need for Christmas to be perfect, to meet expectations is that God would give us hope and comfort and peace and joy. And guess what? If those are your expectations for Christmas, you will never be disappointed! You will experience a perfect Christmas each and every year. God will give exactly as you expect!

That truth carries over to all of life. As we build expectations, it is so easy to set them up according to what we prefer. As a Christian, I want God to take away all the burdens and problems, I want God to bless me with comfort and prosperity. I want God to give me Christian relationships that meet my every need and never have strains and conflicts. I want God to give me a Christian church that edifies me in just the right way and brings me absolute joy in worship and service and community. And what happens with those expectations? I can assure you that they won't be met. And the result? We doubt God's goodness in our lives. We are disappointed in our relationships. We grow disenchanted with our church. It is an ugly scene when expectations are set based upon personal preference.

But if those expectations for life continue to be set by looking to the Word of God? Then we will see, like Job, that the Lord's plans and purposes are always full of compassion and mercy. We will see, like Paul in Romans 16, all the ways in which God blesses us through the people in our lives, as imperfect as they may be. We will remember that as a member of the church, we are members of a body, and what might not build me up in the way that I like, is strengthening another part of the body, and that can bring me joy.

As we set our expectations for life according to the Scripture, God tells us clearly that we will not always like what is in front of us. That is why Jesus ended his message to John with these words, ***"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*** Life with Jesus will not always be filled with joy. Life with Jesus will not always be comfortable. Expect to endure, to persevere, to struggle. And then, after all of that, then expect to be blessed with eternal joys and comforts promised to you by God in his Word. Amen.