

What Did You Expect?

Matthew 11:2-11

December 14, 2025 (Advent 3-C)

St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

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 cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 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. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:2-11, NIV)

In the name of the coming Messiah, Jesus our Savior, dear fellow believers:

The time before Christmas is a time of expectation. We expect to see presents appear under the Christmas tree, and we hope that one or two, or more of those presents will have our name on them. We might expect to get a toy or a game that's advertised on TV, or a nice set of jewelry or the keys to a new car! If so, we might be disappointed on Christmas when we unwrap the presents and don't get those things. On the other hand, if we don't expect that much, we might find that our Christmas will exceed our expectations.

The season of Advent is a time of expectation. Our text today addresses expectations about the coming Messiah, and expectations about the Messiah's messenger. As we examine this text from Matthew's gospel, let's ask ourselves the question: **What Did You Expect?**

About Jesus? This question came from John the Baptist: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” John, you know, was Jesus' forerunner. We heard him in last week's gospel, proclaiming, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2). He called on the people to be prepared for the one coming after him: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). When Jesus appeared, John identified him as the Coming One, the Messiah: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

But here we find John in prison. Why? He had rebuked the king of the region, King Herod, of his adultery with his brother's wife Herodias. So Herod threw John in prison, and he was under the threat of death. It was natural for John to start wondering: “Why did this happen to me? Where's the fire that's supposed to come to punish the wicked like Herod?” John expected Jesus to come with a little more thunder against the wicked, and Jesus wasn't meeting those expectations.

Is Jesus the One? Does Jesus match your expectations? Maybe there are times, too, when we wonder why God isn't directly punishing the wicked, why wicked behaviors and sins are celebrated in our society and why those who stand up for the truth get persecuted. Why doesn't Jesus come to judge and punish them? I suspect, though, that most find disappointment with Jesus in a different direction: “Jesus is supposed to be the Prince of Peace. So why is there so much discord, strife and war in the world? Why is Christianity divided? So many churches are not in agreement with one another about the Bible.” It seems like Jesus doesn't meet those expectations of peace, either.

When we wonder, “Are you the One?”, let’s do as John did and go to Jesus. Find the answer in his Word, the Bible. Jesus pointed to the works he was doing that were fulfilling the prophecies in Isaiah, which we heard in our first reading: “Go and tell John what you see...The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised.” All those miracles show that he is the Messiah. And, Jesus pointed to the words he was saying, fulfilling Isaiah 61 that foretold the Messiah was anointed “to proclaim good news to the poor.” This refers to the spiritually poor, those in debt to God for their sins. Jesus brings good news indeed: Your sins are forgiven, for Jesus came to pay the debt in full!

How about for us? What did you expect about Jesus? We have to say that Jesus meets and far exceeds our expectations. Look at the works our Messiah did in our lives. Born in sin, we were then baptized in the name of the triune God. We became members of God’s family by grace! We were dead in sin, but God raised us to spiritual life through the gospel. Even now, the Holy Spirit keeps us in faith when we hear the gospel message, the Word of truth and grace. Let there be no doubt: Jesus is the One to Come, he is the Messiah, anointed to be our Prophet, our Priest, and our King.

When John’s disciples returned to tell John all this, Jesus turned to the crowd that was listening and spoke to them about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?” What did you expect about Jesus’ messenger, John? “A reed swayed by the wind?” In other words, someone who bends with times, says what’s popular opinion? That certainly wasn’t John; he stood firm on the truth, fearlessly called on people to repent, including the king. Or is John “a man dressed in fine clothes?” Instead of soft silk, John wore camel’s hair with a leather belt. John wasn’t a man to be found in kings’ palaces—he was a man in a king’s prison.

So what did you expect about John? “A prophet? Yes,” John was a prophet, the last in a line of men chosen by God to speak his Word to the people. “And more than a prophet.” The appearance of John fulfilled this prophecy in Malachi: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” John was privileged to be that messenger who came right before the Messiah, preparing his way by preaching repentance and baptizing. We can certainly agree with Jesus: “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”

But then Jesus says something unexpected about John: “Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” How could the least be greater than the messenger of the Messiah? In this way: As great as John was, he didn’t live to see the fulfillment that Jesus would bring. We today, “least that we are,” have this advantage: We are privileged to have seen by faith Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

Jesus’ words make us think about his messengers today. What do you expect about his messenger, the pastor? You should expect him not to be a reed swayed by the wind, but one who is firm and solid on the Word, on Scriptural truth. Don’t expect from your pastor fanciness or “polish,” or displaying wealth like a televangelist. Expect them to have weaknesses, as the prophets and even as John displayed. Don’t expect the pastor to do it all, for the Lord has really called all of us, in whatever position we have, to share the love of Jesus and support God’s kingdom work.

As we approach Christmas, and as we get ready for Christ’s second coming, we know what to expect: Our Lord, the Messiah, is coming, and he brings love and forgiveness through faith to us. When Jesus appears, he exceeds our expectations. And, most unexpectedly of all, he calls you and me to be his messengers. What love is this! Amen.