



BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

December 11, 2016, Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11: 2-11

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Theme: God's promises are beyond our expectations.

Let us pray: "Tune our ears to hear the ancient words of Scripture. Enlarge our imaginations so that your word might offer us whispers of deep truth. Open our hearts so that we might be warmed on this cold winter's day. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen."

We had all three of our kids and all three of our grandchildren with us for Thanksgiving Day. Bright and early, we trooped down to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. At the generous invitation of the Lindemuth family, we got to watch the parade from the second floor windows of the New York Athletic Club on 59th Street. Warm and cozy inside, and the balloons pass by at eye level. For most of the parade, I had my transfixed, four-year-old grandson, Shepard, on my lap in front of one of the windows.

I love the Macy's Parade because it doesn't pretend to be anything it's not. It's always been blatantly and unapologetically commercial – no religious or patriotic pretensions. It is what it is. The balloons are mostly TV cartoon characters, fast-food spokes-clowns, and assorted inflated super-heroes – everything to pump up a very excited four-year-old boy.

About the middle of the parade, one of the marching bands or maybe a team of balloon wranglers must have marched too fast or too slow, because all of the sudden there was a long gap in the parade – nothing at all coming down 59th Street. My grandson Shepard looked up at me and asked what was going on. Without



thinking about the vocabulary of a four-year-old, I said, “*Oh, it’s a hiatus in the parade.*” At which he became even more animated than usual and cried out, “*A hiatus!?! A real hiatus is coming? I always wanted to see the hiatus!*” I have no idea what Shepard thought a hiatus might be. But I do know this – our grown-up expectations are often just as wide of the mark as his expectation of a balloon hiatus.

The Gospel reading for the day that Peter read a moment ago is also about expectations that were wide of the mark. It’s hardly a Christmas story though. It takes place a good three decades after Jesus was born, a year or two after Jesus began his work. Herod Antipas, the perfidious quisling king of Judea, has recently arrested John the Baptist and shut him up in his fortress overlooking the Dead Sea.

This is not the same Herod whom the Magi had visited decades earlier, not the same Herod who’d ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. Today’s Herod is the *son* of that earlier Herod, but he’s just as nasty. This younger Herod was also involved in a scandalous marriage to his erstwhile mistress, a woman who also happened to be both his niece *and* his sister-in-law at the same time. (You can’t make this stuff up!) Anyway, John the Baptist had negatively critiqued Herod’s romantic liaison in typical John the Baptist, straight-to-the-point fashion. That impolitic sermon had landed him in prison. (Sermons sometimes get preachers in trouble.) Ironically, John, who is soon to be executed, is languishing in the same prison in which Herod had locked up his number-one wife.

From his cell, John somehow gets a word out to some of his followers. He tells them to go find Jesus and ask him a huge question, point blank: “*Are you he who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” “*One to come*” is code for the Messiah. It appears that Jesus was not exactly meeting John’s expectations about the Messiah.

John had his own picture of a proper Messiah. John seems to have expected a Messiah who would come – in John’s own words – with “fire,” a Messiah who would come with “a winnowing fork,” a Messiah who would lay the axe against



the root of any tree that did not bear good fruit. That's all John's language, by the way. John the Baptist preached hard-edged judgment and demanded stringent moral reform. His sermons were peppered with hair-raising images of divine fury. And John seems to have expected a Messiah a little like himself.

Jesus answers John's disciples by paraphrasing the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who had talked about how the Messiah would bring change – but it's not the kind of change John expected: *"Go and tell John what you hear and see,"* Jesus says to John's messengers, *"The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them..."* No fire, no winnowing forks, no political revolutions – none of what John seems to have been expecting from a proper Messiah. Jesus promises nothing but *love and healing and life, nothing but love and healing and life.*

After John's disciples leave, Jesus says a good word on John's behalf. He critiques popular expectation about John. "What did you expect out of a prophet like John?" he asks – a *"reed shaken by the wind?"* *"Someone dressed in soft robes... in a royal palace?"* John was John. But then Jesus adds a *huge* caveat to the compliment: *"Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven (that is to say, the least follower in Jesus' way) is greater than he (than John, that is)."* Jesus is simply saying that the way of John, the way of fiery judgment may indeed have its place, but then his huge caveat – *what John seems to have expected of a Messiah is simply not Jesus' way.*

So here we are, deep into Advent, the consummate season of expectation. And like John's expectations of Jesus, like little Shepard's expectations of the hiatus on 59th Street, our expectations are often just as wide of the mark:

What we expect of Christmas is often wide of the mark.

What we expect of the people we love is often wide of the mark.

What we expect of ourselves is often wide of the mark.

What we expect of life itself is often wide of the mark.

What we expect of God is often wide of the mark.



But that being true, the message of this sermon is *not* to lower your expectations. Rather the message, indeed a core message of the Gospel, is that we are very often called to alter our expectations. We are not called to lower our expectations, but we are invited to allow our expectations to be transformed, to be raised up – higher, nobler, toward God. Point is this, the future that God promises is never lower than our expectations, but it's often very different from what we expect. What God holds out for us in our future is often more than we even know how to imagine. So often, what God holds out for us is more than what we think we want, more than what we fancy we need.

We live in a world that's not very good at waiting. I get impatient waiting ten minutes for the Fifth Avenue bus. The shelves at Gristede's are stocked with products labeled "instant," "easy" and "quick." A friend once told me about his teenaged son standing in front of the microwave oven waiting for popcorn to pop and blurting out, "*Oh come on, hurry up!*"

But waiting can be a gift, because it gives us time. So often it's in waiting for what we expect, in waiting for what we think we want, in waiting for what we are so convinced we need, that our self-generated and self-focused expectations can be given time to be re-formed – not lowered, but changed, raised higher.

John seems to have expected a Messiah a bit like himself, one come to dethrone wicked Herod and drive out the Romans. It would appear that a lot of popular expectation about the coming Messiah was along this line. Even some of Jesus' own disciples seem to have expected that kind of a savior as well.

But what God actually did was so different, so totally beyond expectations. Who expected a Messiah born in a barn to a peasant family? Who expected a Messiah whose only army was a gaggle of upstate fisherman, a few independent-minded women, an errant tax collector? Who expected a Messiah whose only throne was a cross? Who expected a Messiah whose only crown was of thorns? Who expected a Messiah who lived mercy, a Messiah who embodied compassion, a Messiah who insisted on only one thing, love of God and neighbor? Who expected a Messiah



who would defeat only one enemy, death itself? Jesus was not what anybody expected.

So deep in an Advent season of expectation, remember just this: waiting can be a gift. It can be a gift because in the waiting, God and time just may alter your expectations – not lower them, but change them, raise them up higher, offering not what you thought you wanted, but what you actually need.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.