

Advent 3A 11 December 2022  
Matthew 11:2-11  
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth  
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Let's pray: ....*

We are a people of expectations. When we go to bed at night, we expect the sun to rise in the morning. We expect other drivers to stop at stop signs. We expect the church to be open on Sundays, the lights on, and Holy Communion to be celebrated. We have expectations for what we consider appropriate behaviour for ourselves and others. Expectations offer some predictability and order to our world and lives.

However, there are other expectations that affect us in a more profound way. Sometimes we have expectations of hope and at other times, expectations of dread. Either way, these expectations have the power to imprison us.

Expectations of hope create a framework for how we think the world and life should pan out for us. They're often the ideals and dreams that drive us forward. In some way, they describe our vision for the world and what we want. There are also expectations of dread, the things of life that we fear and try to avoid. Whenever we talk about wanting to simply get through the next day, the week, a particular aspect of our life, there's an underlying expectation of dread.

The thing about expectations is that they pull us out of our present reality into a future we don't yet have, other than the one that exists in our head. It doesn't take long before we begin to act and speak as though our expectations are the reality of our lives. Then those expectations begin to shape our attitudes, our beliefs, and the way we relate to other people.

Those expectations even shape our image of who God is, where God can show up, and how God should act. If God doesn't meet our expectations, we're often quick to question God rather than ourselves. We trust our expectations of what God should be doing more than we trust what God is actually doing.

Take John the Baptist as an example. In last week's gospel we heard John crying out in the Judean wilderness, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He expects a new kingdom and a new ruler. He expects wrath, fire, axes. He expects one who is more powerful. John's expectations have given him the confidence and ability to turn his back on the religious establishment, to go to the desert, and to seek God in the wild and untamed places of life.

Today, we're offered a very different picture of John. Today he's a prisoner with a question, "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?" So, what's changed between last week and now? How did John get from gallivanting around the vast expanse of the wilderness to being hemmed in by four walls? How did he change from the bold and wild prophet with all the answers, to a timid prisoner with doubts and questions?

On one level, it started when he criticised King Herod. "It is not lawful for you to have [your brother's wife]" (Matthew 14:1-4). So, Herod arrested, bound, and imprisoned John the Baptist. That's the historical account, but holy scripture always beckons us to dig discerningly for deeper spiritual truths and meaning.

It's true that Herod arrested John and physically bound and jailed him. But John's own expectations have imprisoned him spiritually. Herod's historical bricks and mortar jail, is an external symbol of the inner prison in which John has become trapped. It's the interior prison of disappointment and disillusion. He's confined by his own unmet expectations. He's heard about what Jesus the Messiah is doing, but where's last week's axe, fire, and winnowing fork? Where's the wrath in the midst of cleansing lepers, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead? So, John sends a message, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" It's as though John's saying, "You're kidding, aren't you? Isn't there someone else? Someone who better fits my expectations?"

John has been incarcerated by his own expectations of who the Messiah is and how the Messiah should act. His vision of the kingdom is too small, his expectation of the Messiah too limited. That's the danger of holding onto our expectations too tightly. Whether they're expectations of hope or expectations of dread, our own expectations often blind us to the One who is coming, to the One who is more powerful. We imprison ourselves with a view of God, the kingdom, the world, and our own lives that's too small, too limited. We try to limit God's work and life to our expectations. But that's not who God is or how God acts:

- We want God to make our lives easy; instead, he calls us to live more deeply.
- We want God to eliminate our suffering; yet, we discover that God is standing with us in the midst of our pain.
- We expect God to make us number one but he calls us to identify with the least, the last, and the lost.
- We want God to make us strong but he calls us to discover his strength in our weakness.
- We hope God will destroy our enemies but he commands us to love them.
- We want to be the leaders but God tells us to be servants.
- Probably most befuddling to us is that we expect Jesus to gallop into town astride a noble steed, brandishing a flaming sword, waving his standard, and proclaiming loudly, "Victory!" Instead, he hangs on a cross and cries out those haunting words, "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'" (Matthew 27:46)?

The truth is that every time our expectations aren't met, our prison walls crumble. Jesus' way has been meticulously prepared and we must challenge ourselves to escape the confinement of our expectations, rather than simply rebuilding the walls? It would be so much easier if Jesus would just come, do, and be as we expect, wouldn't it? But he won't. He won't leave us in our cells no matter how comfortable or safe they might seem to us. Jesus loves us too much to do that.

Still, from our side of the relationship, we're stubbornly predisposed to clinging to our expectations and persisting with our question, "Are you or are you not, the One who is coming? Should we wait for someone else? Please answer the question Jesus." Saints, he won't do that for John or for us because a simple yes or no answer won't release us from our self-imprisonment. We'll escape only when we let go of our expectations. We'll escape when we open our hearts and minds to God's bigger kingdom. We'll escape when we trust the personal, living God, more than our ideas about God.

The Season of Advent is the season of jailbreaks. It's the season of escaping our limited expectations of God. It's the time when, contrary to our expectations, God shows us that it's not the end of the world; that wrath, axes, and fire are about love and healing rather than punishment and destruction; when God is as quiet as a thief in the night.

There's no denying that the door of our jail cell is locked, but it's only locked from the inside. Jesus invites us to open the door and escape the confines of our expectations. A whole new world awaits. I wonder what we might see. That, the scriptures tell us clearly, friends - the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, the poor having good news brought to them, and those who take no offence at Jesus being blessed.

In other words, Dear Christians, contrary to the bleating of the prophets of gloom and doom about the imminent end of the world; despite sin, death, and the devil's rancorous, evil schemes, God works and walks quietly and tirelessly among you, his children, restoring and refreshing body and soul, bringing good news, and blessing you with the miracle of faith. God is always coming to former inmates to set them free and show them the way. So, go and tell others what you hear and see, bringing glory to God by the words of your mouths and the meditations of your hearts, for the sake of Jesus who died and now lives for us all. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, the greater One who is coming. Amen.