



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 16, 2007
3rd Sunday of Advent
Matthew 11:2-11
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm of the Day: Psalms 146
Second Lesson: James 5:7-11
Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

Elusive Expectations

We are in the middle of an exciting time of the year, right? There are all kinds of expectations. You go out and shop and you find that special gift to give to someone for Christmas and as you are shopping, don't you just picture to yourself how excited they are going to be when they open that gift because you are going to give them exactly what they wanted and surprise them and it is just going to thrill you to death? Is that what you kids are thinking about, or are you thinking more about how you can't wait to rip the paper off, and you're expecting what you are going to be given and not what you're giving to someone else? Either way, there are a lot of expectations, right?

I remember this time of the year when I had some pretty big expectations. My eyes got real big when I was a little kid because my uncle came over for my birthday and had this box that he could barely fit through the front door. This box was huge. In my mind, I was just imagining what incredible present could have been in there. So I tear into it when we finally got done eating. That's the first time in my life you probably ever heard me say that, right? We finally finished eating. I start tearing into the present, and inside is a bunch of newspaper. I think, "Okay, that's interesting." I start digging around in the newspaper and there are matchbox cars in the little boxes. There are a ton of matchbox cars, and it was really a great present, but poor Uncle Al had to sit there and watch my face go crestfallen as a little kid because I was expecting something huge, not a bunch of little things, you know. My expectations weren't met. It was kind of elusive and he gave me this great gift, but because my expectations weren't met, I kind of rained on his parade, I suppose, as a little kid. That little bottom lip just came out kind of big and a bird could have sat on it as I pouted that day.

Elusive expectations—that's kind of what Jesus talks about in what we just read in Matthew, isn't it? Whether it was John the Baptist or his disciples, their expectations of what the Messiah should be wasn't what they were seeing, so they were wondering about this, these elusive expectations. So John sends his disciples to go and talk to Jesus, "Are you the one? You're not really what we expected." The people then that Jesus talked to about their expectations when they went out to see John the Baptist in the desert—their expectations weren't necessarily what they would have thought when they first went out to see the sights.

You and I need to be reminded about elusive expectations because, left to our own devices, we'll set up some expectations that God hasn't promised to us. And then when

they are not met, we are always in danger of saying, “God, what’s going on? What are you doing? Don’t you love me? Aren’t you paying attention? I know better.”

So this morning, we want to look at these elusive expectations and warn ourselves against the danger of expecting Christ to fit our agendas and then also the danger of expecting to find an easy message when God has told us the message that prepares us for the birth of the Savior is in reality a very hard message. It’s a message we don’t really want to hear, especially at this time of year, right?

Now why John sent some of his disciples to Jesus while he was in prison—whether it was because John was wondering “is Jesus the Messiah” or whether it was his disciples who were wondering “is Jesus the Messiah,” I don’t know. I don’t think I would be willing to say that John never doubted, because John was a human being, right? He was a sinner. And as he was sitting in prison because he was doing what God had told him to do and he had preached this stern message of repentance, and now he sees Jesus preaching the good news to the poor, forgiveness through him, maybe in his mind he was wondering, “Is this what is supposed to be going on?” Us sinful human beings, when we can see what is in front of our face and it happens to be a prison, we can wonder, “God, what are you doing?” Maybe that’s what John the Baptist was doing. Maybe it was his disciples who just weren’t sure. They had come to Jesus before with questions along the lines of “the Pharisees’ followers wash their hands. Your disciples don’t. What’s going on?” Maybe they had some questions yet, so John sends them to him so they will get their questions answered or perhaps so that he gets his questions answered. Whatever the reason, someone’s expectations about Jesus were not being met. The people thought, perhaps John thought, perhaps his followers thought, “The axe is at the root of the tree.” That’s what John had been saying and they wanted him to come and act more like an axe. They wanted him to come and punish the evil doers. They wanted to see God’s vengeance poured out on the people right away. After all, isn’t that what Isaiah said? “Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

That’s what we just read from Isaiah this morning, right? Maybe they were focusing on that passage and saying, “I don’t see so much divine retribution in Jesus. In fact, I see a guy that is talking about things that are totally different than what I want the Messiah to be doing to those people that aren’t doing what I’m doing.”

It’s pretty easy to fall into elusive expectations when our expectations are based on our own ideas, isn’t it? As you and I go through life, if we have the expectation that because I am a Christian, no trouble will ever befall me. Because I am a Christian and I love God more than those other people, I will never have difficulty financially. I will never have difficulty in relationships. I will never have difficulty with my health. If that’s our expectation, we are going to be in for trouble, aren’t we? As sinners who live in a sinful world, there are going to be all kinds of problems; problems in relationships—we live in a fallen world. Our health isn’t always guaranteed to us. We live in a fallen world, things aren’t always going to be perfect, and God has never, ever promised to you and me that we will not face any of those challenges in our lives. But if that is our expectation and then the trouble comes, we are going to be tempted to say, “God, where are you? God, don’t you know what I’m going through? God, don’t you love me?”

God, aren't you paying attention to me? How could you let this happen to me when Joe Blow over there, who hates you and mocks you, seems to have everything go his way?" Boy, do you think the devil is going to be in our ears whispering that if we have that false expectation? You bet!

Even if we don't have that expectation, when difficulty comes, I believe Satan is going to be there whispering in our ears that same thing to try to get us to change our expectations of God's promises. But what has God promised us?

With divine retribution he will come to save you. He will come to take away all of our sins—the times that we have doubted him, the times that we didn't trust him, the time we blamed him for things that are our fault or the fault of living in a fallen world. We can rationalize and make a lot of excuses, but when our rationalizations point the finger of blame at God, our rationalizations are evil and useless.

We can expect from God, though, that he loves us in spite of how evil we are at times. We can expect from God that when we look to him, we can be certain that the sins that were washed away at our baptism are forgiven because Christ lived and died in our place—not because we are good, not because we try hard, not because we love him, but because he loved us first and he worked faith in our hearts. Then we have the expectation, the certain promise from God that isn't elusive, that is there when we look for it. He will be with us always to the very ends of the age. He will strengthen us to face whatever worries us, weakens us, frightens us or makes our knees wobble. He will be there through Word and Sacrament to lift us up and to hold us with the everlasting arms. That is his promise to you and me. Focus on that expectation, and even though at times our faith may weaken, even though at times our faith may wander, when we keep coming back to that expectation, our God will make us strong.

So don't expect Christ to fit your agenda. Fit your agenda into God's agenda, and trust with a childlike trust.

After addressing the expectations of John or his disciples or both, Jesus moves on to the people. I think how he addresses the people is interesting. We heard in our Second Lesson the definition of a prophet, right? When he was talking about persecution or perseverance, take as an example of patience in the face of suffering the prophets. What do prophets do?—who spoke in the name of the Lord. Biblical definition of a prophet is one who speaks God's Word to God's people. The people would have known that and yet, did you notice what Jesus said to the people? "What did you go out into the desert to see?" Isn't that an odd question about a prophet? Do you see a prophet or do you hear a prophet? What does that tell you? What is Jesus saying to the people? When he says to them, "What did you go out into the desert to see," isn't he kind of slapping them a little bit saying, "You guys had wrong expectations from the start when you went out to John. You went out there for the show." The streams of people were going out there to see this guy and he wasn't in fine clothes, right?—camel's skin, eating the goofy food, standing out there in the middle of nowhere baptizing a lot of people, telling a lot of people they were a brood of vipers and to repent because the kingdom of God was near. But they went out to see something instead of to hear something.

What Jesus said is, “Did you go out there to see a reed swayed by the wind?” Which means, “Did you go to see someone who was going to say what you wanted to hear?” This wasn’t a political debate that catered to the audience and said what they thought the audience wanted to hear. This was a man who spoke his conviction from God clearly, loudly, and it cost him his head in the end, right? He wasn’t a reed swayed by the wind. He spoke the Word of God faithfully as God enabled him to do. So then, “What did you go out to see,” he says. You went out and you saw a prophet and even though you went out there for the wrong reasons—to see a spectacle—the message he spoke was so strong and so powerful, and God worked through that message so many, many people were baptized and began looking for a different kind of Messiah than what they were thinking about.

He was the chosen one—the forerunner of the Messiah—who would point to the Messiah directly with a finger and say, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” not just into the far future, but into the present. In that case, that is why Jesus can say of John that there is no one born of women greater than him.

But then comes that next phrase right at the end of what we read from our gospel that seems kind of strange. If he is the greatest born of women, what in the world does Jesus mean when he says, “Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”? That is an interesting phrase. The kingdom of heaven is believers, right? The least of the person in the kingdom of heaven is the one who has faith that Jesus is their Savior is greater than John the Baptist. How can that be? We haven’t pointed our finger at Jesus and said, “Behold, the lamb of God.” We haven’t stood up to persecution and said, “You’re a sinner. I don’t care what you are going to do to me. You’re a sinner. Turn back to God.” At least I’m guessing not many of us have spoken that forcefully of God’s Word to one another. How can we be greater than the great prophet John the Baptist?

John the Baptist lost his head before he saw any of the fulfillment, right? Herod took his head and put it on a silver platter to fulfill a foolish vow he had made. John didn’t see it except after he entered into heaven. You and I, as members of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, have seen the fulfillment. We have seen Jesus live perfectly in our place. We have seen Jesus die in our place. We’ve seen the empty tomb through the eyes of faith. We’ve seen how God has worked in history to take away our sins. We got to see what he longed to see, but God called him to heaven before it happened. In that sense, you and I are greater than John the Baptist because we can tell the people the full story. We are sinners. God has taken away our sins. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose again. That is what makes preparing to celebrate Christmas so important because Christmas is followed by Easter and the announcement the victory was won. Our sins are forgiven.

So don’t expect an easy message that says don’t worry about your sin. That’s easy. That’s what the world around us says. God’s message says your sins are horrible. Turn away from them. Don’t continue in them. But don’t try to pay for them yourself. That’s what we would be more comfortable with. We would be more comfortable with God saying, “Okay, now do good and be good and be better than someone else and I

will take you to heaven for trying your best.” No, God doesn’t give us that message either. God gives us the message, “I have done it all. Stop relying on yourself, believe in me, and heaven is yours.”

Expect that to be your confidence and your expectations will always be met.