

EXPECTATIONS AND LET-DOWNS

Matthew 11: 2-15

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

“Why do I feel depressed right now, when I’m supposed to feel happy?” “Why do I feel frustrated right now, when I’m supposed to feel joyful?” “This isn’t the way it was supposed to be. This isn’t what I was expecting.” What kind of person am I describing? It could be someone who is having a difficult time as they go through the Christmas season. But this morning, I’m describing to you someone that might surprise you. I’m describing John the Baptist.

What? I thought he was the strong, faithful prophet that was sent before Jesus to get people

ready for the arrival of the Christ. He was the forerunner, the baptizer. How could he say to himself that he’s depressed or confused or frustrated? How could that be?

This morning, we’re going to see how that could be. Even though John the Baptist was the greatest of all the prophets to come before Jesus, he had moments of doubt and depression and frustration. And in a way, that’s good news for you. He was a human being, just like you. Don’t you have moments of depression, moments of doubt, and frustration? It happens, even to Christians. It happens, especially during the month of December. The months of December and January have the highest occurrences of heart attacks, depression, suicide attempts, and domestic disputes – all those things happen, even among Christians. Why? Isn’t this the month when we were supposed to be the most peaceful and joyful! Let’s look at what John the Baptist was struggling with, and as we do, we’ll learn a little bit about ourselves, and where we can find comfort and hope, especially during those times when we are having difficult moments.

We meet John the Baptist this morning in prison. Last week, we saw him freely preaching in the desert around the Jordan River and baptizing people. While he was out there, he didn’t hold anything back. He called sin, sin. And one of the sins he spoke against was the sin of adultery. King Herod had committed that sin – he had stolen his brother’s wife. And John was outspoken about that. He told the people that Herod and his new wife were sinners. Herod’s new wife didn’t like that. And so, Herod had John the Baptist arrested and thrown into prison. His ministry at the Jordan River was over.

And as John sat in that cold, damp, dirty prison cell, he had a lot of time to think. We don’t know exactly what he was expecting, but he may have thought to himself, “I won’t be in this prison for long. After all, I’m the forerunner of the Messiah. God will get me out of here in no time.” Or maybe he thought to himself, “Now that Jesus is preaching, he’ll put everyone in their place – he’ll judge King Herod, he’ll judge those Pharisees and Sadducees. Finally, justice will be served, because the Messiah is here, and he’s going to lay down the law.” Perhaps those were some of John’s expectations.

But as he sat there in that prison cell, it became

clear to him that those things weren't happening. Some of his friends came to the prison and reported to him what Jesus was doing. Jesus wasn't going town to town, doling out justice, and putting everyone in their place. Instead, he was preaching about peace, and loving your neighbor, and not judging, and that the kingdom of heaven had come, and that the forgiveness of sins had come. "This is NOT what I was expecting," John may have said to himself. And as John thought about these things, perhaps he started to feel a little depressed. "I did my job in the desert, and now I'm sitting in this prison, and the Christ isn't doing what I thought he would be doing." Perhaps John felt a little frustrated, maybe even betrayed by God, because things weren't turning out like he had expected. Finally, John sent some of his friends to Jesus to ask the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Don't people sometimes feel this way during the weeks leading up to Christmas. "I have all these expectations of being filled with joy, and being merry. But instead, I feel a little depressed, and frustrated, maybe even a little betrayed. God, I'm doing everything I'm supposed to do for Christmas." There's sure a lot of pressure! The pressure is on, for you to get the decorations up, for you to get all the gifts you're supposed to get, for you to get everything ready for the family gathering. And on top of that, you've got all your regular responsibilities. You're doing the best you can. You even have a manger scene out early this year – the little baby Jesus is all over your house – but you're not feeling it. Where is that joy that I'm supposed to feel right now? I hear the Christmas carols all over the place, but instead of feeling glad, I feel a little blue. Is this it? Is this Christmas? Or, am I supposed to expect something else?

John the Baptist had that same struggle as he sat in prison. He had all these expectations of what the Christ was going to do, but nothing was happening like he thought. He asked Jesus that question, "Are you the one?" And do you see what Jesus told John? Jesus basically told John, "John, throw all of your expectations out the window, and just look at what I am doing. I'm giving the blind their sight back. I'm causing the lame to walk. I'm curing the lepers. I'm giving the deaf their hearing back. I'm raising people from the dead. Good news is being preached to the poor. John, think of the

miracles. Throw your expectations out the window, and just recognize all these miracles that I am doing.. Focus on me, and forget your expectations."

Focusing on Jesus is normally not what people do during December. December is the month of great expectations. But for many people, Christ is the farthest thing from their minds.

Focusing on Jesus is not something most people in our time and culture do. Everyone is very busy this time of the year, very busy trying to avoid the real point of the season. Shopping will take place, parties will be thrown, cookies will be eaten. Think of all the Christmas cards out there, with the pictures of birds and candles and snow and socks – just about everything but Christ. What is the point of it all? You can listen to the sound of dogs barking to the tune of Jingle Bells. You can rush and run around and hurry. But what is the point of it all?

Why are we doing all this? Without Christ, you get these high expectations of how happy you'll be. But then, as you're going through Christmas, and especially when it's over, you realize, this isn't what I expected. Opening this box of golf balls and drinking extra egg nog isn't giving me the level of joy that I thought I would get.

There would be no need for Christmas at all if there was no sin in the world. There was sin in the world. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men – they were all sinners, and they, along with the rest of the world, were all going to hell, unless God did something. And so God did. He sent his Son, and the purpose of that little baby's existence was to be the Savior of the entire world, of all mankind. Isn't that a miracle? And once you recognize that miracle, and focus on Jesus, then you start to get Christmas.

Just think of what God did. Can you imagine, right now, going back to being an infant? Imagine giving up language, and muscle coordination, and the ability to eat solid food and control your bladder – imagine giving that all up! On Christmas, that's what God did for you! That God would become a human being to take away my sins – that's worth turning my life upside down for a few weeks. When you recognize what's really important, what the real miracles of Christmas are – when you stop focusing on all those expectations that our society feeds you, and instead, just focus on Christ, and what he has done – then

this whole Christmas thing starts to become enjoyable.

I wonder how John the Baptist liked the answer he got from Jesus. “Yes, John, I am the one. Look at the miracles.” I wonder if that good news chased away some of his doubts and feelings of disappointment.

Remember this story when you find yourself caught in the “Christmas dumps,” when you find yourself mumbling, “This is not what I expected.” Jesus says to you today, forget your expectations. Focus on me, Jesus says, and I’ll give you joy. I won’t decorate your house for you or help you buy gifts or cook for your family gathering. I won’t do any of that for you,” Jesus says. “But I will give you something that everyone would love to have during the Christmas season. I’ll give you joy and contentment.” Take some time, during these next few weeks, and ponder all the miracles that Jesus has done for you, in the past, right now in your life, and what he will do for you in the future.” Focus on that, Jesus says, and there you’ll find your Advent AND Christmas joy. Amen?

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December 11, 2016
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