

What Were You Expecting?
A Sermon on Matthew 11:2-11
Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2019

Introduction

The second and third Sundays in Advent traditionally are about John the Baptist. On the second Sunday John talks about the age to come. On the third Sunday he asks about Jesus' public ministry.

John has been preaching that a stronger one is coming. He will be the eschatological judge. He will separate the wheat from the chaff. The shovel is in his hand. He will gather everyone who bears good fruit and put them in the barn. The chaff he will burn with an unquenchable fire.

John thought Jesus was the one. Now he is in prison and he is confused about Jesus. He expected a judge, but he hasn't seen Jesus execute any divine judgment.

Let's not be too hard on John. He is the smartest kid in the class and he's not sure who Jesus is. He is asking a question we all ask.

First Move: Who Is Jesus?

The first five verses in today's text respond to the question, who is Jesus? John is the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but he doesn't get it quite right. John anticipates a Messiah who will be the Son of Man, a divine figure who will judge the earth by fire.

John is still in prison. That is a strange place for him to be if Jesus has come to set the captives free. John is being treated like the chaff that is being separated from the wheat.

The NRSV translation says, "when he heard what the Messiah was doing." The translation loses something. A more literal translation would be, "when he heard about the deeds of the Messiah." The Greek word for deeds is *ἔργα*. It could also be translated as works. The deeds of Christ are preaching and healing. Jesus represents a different kind of Messiah. There are no surviving Jewish texts that say that the Messiah or the Son of Man will heal.

John sends word through his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is coming or are we expecting another?" By using *we*, "are *we* expecting another," Matthew could mean that John is speaking as a representative of the people.

The Greek word προσδοκάω is usually translated as waiting for or expecting. Its root meaning is believe, think, assume. We are expecting something that we believe will happen.

Another is a translation of ἕτερος. It has been transliterated into English as the prefix, *hetero-*. It means something different in kind. Should we wait for a different kind of Messiah?

John is beginning to doubt whether Jesus is the Messiah. Perhaps he should doubt what he is expecting.

Jesus doesn't answer the question. He responds instead as a good pastor. He tries to draw more out of his parishioner. Tell me more. What are you hearing and seeing?

Putting hearing first emphasizes hearing over seeing. Jesus begins his public ministry in Matthew with the Sermon on the Mount in Chapters 5 through 7. Jesus then performs a series of healing miracles in Chapters 8 and 9.

This is an oracle of salvation. These are signs of what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. In chapter 6 of the Book of Isaiah, God was angry at the people for turning away from God; Isaiah delivered an oracle of judgment. God would shut the eyes of the people and shut their ears. They would look and not see, listen and not understand. Isaiah says, "How long, O Lord?" How long will the people suffer? Until cities are laid waste, the land is made desolate and the people are sent away.

The suffering is coming to an end. Jesus has been doing the things that Isaiah prophesied about in his oracles of salvation. Isaiah lists some of them in today's Old Testament reading:

^{35:5} Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Again, Isaiah 29:18 says, "On that day, the deaf shall hear . . . and the eyes of the blind shall see." The prophets Elijah and Elisha healed lepers and raised the dead. The last in the series is the climax of all these miracles: the poor are receiving good news. This is a reference to Isaiah 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.

These are not the miracles of the Son of Man. This is the time of fulfillment that Isaiah prophesied about, when God would bring salvation to Israel by restoring the kingdom. Isaiah does not link it to the coming of a Messiah. No one expected the Messiah to be a healer.

Jesus understands that John was expecting something different. He fears that John has been scandalized by a different kind of Messiah, a warrior who would liberate Israel and judge the nations.

The Greek verb *σκανδαλίζω* appears 11 times in Matthew's gospel. When it is translated in the NRSV, it has six different meanings, so you can't tell that the same verb is being used. The NRSV in today's text translates it as, "take no offense at me." It is stronger than that. It literally means to set a trap with a spring to catch an animal. When the same word is used in Paul, it is sometimes translated as stumbling block. Paul says that the cross is a stumbling block.

Jesus pronounces a beatitude on those who are not scandalized by him. Blessed are those who recognize Jesus and accept him for who he truly is.

Second Move: Who Is John?

Jesus then rehabilitates John. The last six verses in today's text answer the question, who is John? Three times Jesus asks, "What do you come out in the wilderness to see?"

"Did you expect to see a reed being shaken in the wind?" This could mean at least three different things. Reeds grew in the wild along the Jordan River. A reed shaken by the wind would have been a commonplace event. People did not go in the wilderness to see something so ordinary. A reed being shaken in the wind could also refer to Herod. Herod had three palaces on the Jordan River. He put a reed on the back of his coins as a symbol of his rule. Jesus could be implying that Herod is weak and bends with the wind. Or it could refer to the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14-15, when God brought about strong winds to part the sea. The people may be hoping for another mighty miracle of liberation.

"Did you expect to see men in soft robes?" Soft robes could be an allusion to Herod and his court. It was a great insult to call a man soft. The crowds following Jesus were Galilean peasants. They were farmers who worked with their hands for a living. The ruling elite lived off the work of others. They had soft hands and they wore soft clothes. Soft robes could also refer to Messianic expectations of a son of David, who would wear royal robes.

I think Jesus' response most likely means, reeds and royal robes are there in the wilderness, but that is not what you came to see.

Jesus asks a third and final time, what did you go out to see? A prophet, yes, and more than a prophet.

Walter Brueggeman, an Old Testament scholar, writes in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, that conservatives misunderstand prophets as those who can predict the future, while liberals reduce prophecy to righteous indignation and social action. A true prophet is someone who can help people imagine a future that is different from the consciousness of the dominant society.

John is such a prophet. He gets it wrong about what kind of Messiah Jesus will be, but John had a vision that the people needed to repent for the kingdom of God was drawing near. That vision has endured through the centuries.

Jesus tells the crowds that John is the one about whom it has been written, “Behold, I am sending out my messenger or angel before you the face of you, who will prepare your way ahead of you.” He will lead Israel to a new future. This is an allusion to Exodus 23. God sends the angel of the Lord before the people of Israel when they are in the wilderness. The angel is leading the people out of bondage in Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. John is helping the people to re-live the Exodus story. They are being delivered from bondage into the kingdom of God.

Jesus seems to diminish John by saying, “There has not been raised up among those born of women one greater than John the baptizer, but the one who is smallest in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than him.” This is simply a recognition that there is a sharp dividing line between life before the kingdom and life in the kingdom. John belongs to the old age. He helped lead people from the old age to the new age, but like Moses, he didn’t pass over to the other side. Life in the kingdom is much richer than life in the old age. The smallest in the kingdom is greater than the greatest in the old age.

Third Move: What Does the Kingdom Look Like?

The kingdom of God scandalizes us. It challenges our expectations. People may doubt whether gentleness and non-violence can really work in the world. Jesus is not what people want or are expecting. Jesus is not electable. Do we recognize what is taking place through Jesus as the breaking in of the kingdom of God? Or do we dismiss it? Do we not notice it at all? Are we still deaf and blind?

Brueggeman says that Jesus’ imagination stirs him to acts of compassion. He takes the pain and suffering of people seriously. Empires are not built on compassion; they are built on numbing us to the condition of the less fortunate. Jesus rejects that vision and extends his compassion to the whole range of people that are hurting.

To say that Jesus is the Christ transforms the meaning of Christ. Jesus challenges the assumption that the way things are is the way things have to be. Just when John thinks he understands the kingdom in all its fullness, he is shown that the kingdom is larger than and different from what he had imagined. Our imagination is not big enough.

Expectation is part of the joy of Christmas. Kids get excited just thinking about it, and the excitement continues until the day arrives. They shake the packages under the tree and try to guess what is wrapped inside. As we become adults, our hopes are about being home with our families for Christmas.

In our relationships, we are full of hopes for our partners. We have a hard time accepting them for who they are instead of who we want them to be. We have a hard time living up to the expectations our spouses have of us. Society encourages women to fantasize about Prince Charming. Men put women on a pedestal. Gay people think about a soulmate. What does a soulmate look like? How do you imagine your soulmate before you meet them?

One of the beautiful things about having a baby together is the expectation that comes with it. It will be a miracle; they will look like both of us. Still, we can't imagine what our children will look like before they are born.

At a Candlelight service, the candles are a sign of what we are hoping for. We burn candles and sing *Silent Night* as we await the coming of the Christ child. This child stirs the possibilities within us of a new future.

Expectation of the kingdom is part of our drive for a deeper life. It opens us up to the future.

Jesus' greatest gift to us was his imagination. Jesus raises a profound question: what would heaven on earth be like? He gave us indelible images of the kingdom of God. It is a place where the meek are blessed and peacemakers will inherit the earth.

Martin Luther King was the greatest prophet of the 20th century. He extended Jesus' vision of the kingdom and called it the Beloved Community.

Will people stop demonizing other people because of their skin color or their religious and political beliefs? Will people across the world find a way to share the world's resources in a way that is equitable and sustainable? Will groups and parties put the common good ahead of their own self interest? Will we show compassion to the whole range of people who are suffering?

We still have a hard time imagining what the kingdom of God looks like. Will we wear halos and play harps all day long? The prophets tell us that the lion will lie down with the lamb, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and people will not learn war any more. This is a vision of the future that has endured for 2,500 years.

It means we will stop arguing with each other and learn how to treat everyone we meet with respect and empathy.

What do we expect of church? People today are expecting impressive facilities with a large membership and lots of programs. Jesus may well say, “Get behind me, Satan,” to people who have those types of expectations. Can we expect churches need to model the Beloved Community and witness to it? Then church will be a compelling alternative for society.

Conclusion

We are full of expectation during Advent. Our Gospel reading today calls us to challenge those expectations. We can’t be too settled in our beliefs. We still need to ask basic questions like, who is Jesus? and what does the kingdom look like? Then we will be less likely to remake Jesus in our own image; instead we will remake ourselves in his image.

Advent anticipates the birth of Christ. This child will bless us with his prophetic imagination of the coming of a new world if only we will open ourselves up to it.

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