

Third Sunday in Advent

December 11, 2015

Marley UMC

Isaiah 35.1-10

Psalm 146.5-10

Luke 1.47-55

James 5.7-10*

Matthew 11.2-11*

Are You the One?

Grace and Peace to You from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

Most of us have had experiences from time to time where we have gotten excited about some new thing and thrown ourselves into it with great enthusiasm and high expectations and then after a little while found ourselves feeling disappointed. We believed our lives were going to be changed, but whatever our new-found enthusiasm may have been, it didn't live up to expectations. And we were left with whatever we set out to cure in the first place plus some sadness, disappointment and perhaps a sense of failure.

Now, this may surprise you but there are plenty of people out there who feel that way about Jesus. They gave the whole faith-in-Jesus thing a try, but it didn't live up to expectations, and they gave up on it after a while. Of course, the problem wasn't with Jesus, it was with their expectations. There have been people reacting that way to Jesus all along, even in his own lifetime. Judas was certainly one of them. And judging by the gospel story we heard this morning, John the Baptizer might have been one too, or at least one who began to ask the question: "Has this Jesus lived up to expectations, or has he let us down?"

The major themes of the Advent season focus around expectations, anticipation and hope. And the question of just what it is we are expecting

exactly is pretty important. We all had some sort of expectations of what it would mean when we chose to follow Jesus. We believed it would make a difference somehow, and just what we were expecting probably depended most on the beliefs and expectations of the Christians who most influenced us to make that decision. For some, it will have been significant personal outcomes:

- wellbeing,
- healing,
- inner peace,
- a sense of purpose and meaning,
- guaranteed entry to heaven,
- perhaps even prosperity and success in the here and now.

For others, especially those of you who were more influenced by the Christian left, it may have been more about being part of something that brought about substantial and lasting change for the better in the world.

We expected to see:

- poverty and preventable diseases eradicated,
- reconciliation between previously divided peoples,
- and an end to oppression and war.

And for most, right across the theological spectrum, there will have been some sort of mix of a number of those things. And for most too, there was an expectation that there would come a day when the world would be put right, when God would take charge and justice would be dealt out and everyone, except us, would get just exactly what they deserved.

That last bit seems to have been central to the growing doubts that prompted John the Baptizer to send his question to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 'I know I told everyone that you were the one, but now I'm starting to have my doubts.'

John's preaching was full of warnings of a coming day of judgement, with images of God taking an axe to the root of the tree, and sorting wheat from chaff with a threshing fork, and purging evil from among the people with a flamethrower. As scary as it can sound, the hope for such a day is an

almost universal human dream. At its most naked, you can see it on the steps of the courthouse whenever there is a trial over a crime that has shocked the community. Everyone is looking to the day when the evildoers are made to pay for their crimes, for the day when the victims are vindicated and can stand proud and free as they watch their assailants dragged off in chains to be punished. Most of the time it is less overt, but most people have some sort of hope that a day will come when those who have made the world an unfair, unsafe and miserable place will reap what they have sown, and ordinary folks like us who have mostly done the right thing by those around us will come out on top and be rewarded. The scales have been unjustly tipped against so many of us for so long that there is a widespread hunger to see them finally tipped the other way.

You can see these hopes and desires expressed in the eternally popular song of Mary, known as the Magnificat:

(God) has brought down the mighty from their thrones,
and lifted up those of lowly position;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Lk 1.52f NET)

You can hear that the hoped for day of justice is not so much a day when everyone is put back on a level playing field, but when fortunes are reversed. There will still be a top and a bottom, a blessed and a cursed, but the occupants will be swapped. Those who climbed up over the top of everyone else before will be torn down and be themselves trampled upon.

- Mary's song accurately discerns that God does not favor the rich and powerful over the little people.
- And it does accurately portray our typical human desire to see the little people favored over the rich and powerful?
- BUT does this Scripture promise the scales will be reversed?
- Are we correct in thinking that God endorses such a reversal and stands poised to make that wish come true?
- Or is it more likely that the song has fallen into its own trap and projected our desires onto God?

There is no doubt that Mary's song would have gotten full approval from her cousin's son, John the Baptizer. His preaching was full of the same expectations of the scales tipped, the little people vindicated, and the powerful and exploitative cast into the fire with a threshing fork. And having confidently announced to all who would listen that Jesus was the one who had arrived to bring all this to fulfilment, you can hear the disappointment in his question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

- What happened to the fire?
- where's the revolution,
- the glorious victory?
- How come wickedness and oppression haven't been purged and punished yet?"

And Jesus sends him back an answer that is partial and probably unsatisfying. It is perhaps fair to say that Jesus answers the letter of the question, but not the spirit of the question, the underlying question, he 'real' question. Jesus says,

"Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them." (Matt 11.5 NET)

All of that is, in effect, a positive answer to the question, because Jesus is quoting Old Testament descriptions of things that were expected to happen when the messiah came. But he is also doing one of those things that often infuriated people. He is quoting only part of the scripture. He is leaving stuff out. He is claiming only part of the messianic expectations, and saying, "Yes, I'm the one who was to come to do these things," but he is leaving other things out of the expectations, and is refusing to be drawn into them. And what he is leaving out are precisely the things that John wanted to hear:

- the great judgement,
- the axe at the root of the tree,
- the cosmic tipping of the scales
- and the fiery punishment.

And then Jesus says something very intriguing and probably extremely important. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." (Matt 11.6 NET) Or perhaps more literally, "Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me." Or more colloquially, "Blessed is anyone who doesn't get their panties in a twist over me."

So what he is saying is "I'm not going to be everything you thought I was going to be. There are things you had wrong about what the coming of God's messiah would mean. There are things you were projecting onto God, expecting him to deliver on things you wanted, things that were just your own desires projected onto him. And he says, "I'm not buying into all that. You don't get to tell me what to do. But stick with me. Don't get your panties in a twist. I will challenge your hopes. And if you don't get all upset and bent out of shape and if you trust me and hang in there, your abandoned hopes will be converted and transcended, and the new world I bring, though it will not be what you were expecting, will be far greater than anything you ever dreamed of."

My friends if you're depending on Jesus to fulfill all your expectations, whatever they might be, then I've got bad news for you. He probably won't. And if you cling to those expectations insisting you are right and evaluating Jesus on how he measures up to your expectations, then you will probably be offended and scandalized by his apparent disregard for your cherished dreams and delusions. And you will be disappointed in him, and may even give up on him and many abandon his path at some point.

But--but, if you are willing to trust him completely, and allow him to rewrite your hopes and dreams in the shape of his scandalous love and compassion and mercy. If you will allow him to change you so that instead of expecting him to bring what you want--you begin to want what he brings, life suddenly get interesting. And if his often unwelcome commitment to reconciliation instead of revenge becomes your prayer as well, then I can assure you will instead find yourself converted and transformed and lifted to a nobility of spirit that you could barely have imagined, and ushered into the exhilarating new world that is being born even now.

OK – so far, this has all been phrased in generalities as basic truths – what is the practical application in our lives today?

Well, certainly each of us has our own portfolio of hopes and dreams and our own well-nourished list of disappointments and grievances. Examine them, pray about them and ask God to change your thinking so that your mind and his are in agreement – so that your hopes and dreams are of the things that he is going to bring to you. Ask God to teach you to want what he wants.

It is not easy to allow God to rewrite our value system, to change up what we want or think is right. But that is what he does. I am reminded somewhere in my past of a saying being in common use to the effect that when you pray for God to change the world, he begins by changing you.

It is also true that the future of our country is in God's hands. He has never allowed the presence or absence of kings or presidents or their agenda to tell him what to do. Our faith should never have been in the occupant of the White House, but in the kingship of Jesus Christ who is the only power in the world which has your best interests at heart.

It is also true that the church is in God's hands. The church and its future is in God's hands. The task of any congregation is to simply be faithful in the community, answer the call to ministry as it comes from Him – and realize the future is up to God. Only he can revitalize, only he can breathe new life, and if he doesn't live up to our expectations, then we need to allow him to adjust our expectations. If we can quit telling God what to do, then maybe we can begin to accept that if God doesn't change anything, maybe things are the way he wants them to be, or maybe he's waiting for us to quit trusting in our own efforts and get out of his road so he can do his work through us.

We live in a culture that rewards effort and hard work – well, it says it does anyway. But even those expectations need to be rewritten in the light of what God has to say to us – which is that he is in charge and he will determine what the future is going to look like. Our task, and I know as well as any of you that it is not an easy one, is to allow him to rewrite our

expectations so they are in harmony with his will. And to wait expectantly for his return.

Amen