

Advent 3 Year A
Matthew 11:2-11
St. Paul's Episcopal
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Expected or Not, God has Come to Us

I try to imagine John sitting in his prison cell. How would he have passed the time? Would he track the number of days he was there? What would we have been waiting for? I wonder this because we do find ourselves this time of year marking the passing of time. We light candles for each of the 4 Sunday's in Advent, many of us have Advent traditions in our homes, my children have the advent calendar at home that I grew up that my mother made, to mark the passing of the days as we lead up to Christmas. This time of year has anticipating, waiting, expecting. But as with all things anticipated and waited upon, the buildup can often result in a letdown. Instead of being an occasion for joy and cheer we can often find ourselves feeling anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, or as with all expectations, we can find ourselves underwhelmed. There is always the risk of disappointment when we find ourselves anticipating.

Hallmark, it's always Hallmark's fault, puts the idea in our heads of a perfect Christmas with laughter and handmade sweaters and generations of the family gathered around the table or tree in bliss.

But as the years go on, our lives get more complicated it seems, loved ones have died that we find ourselves missing even more so this time of year. Things get done or said that we wish had not, yet remain unresolved and we try, for the sake of everyone and the spirit of the season, to hold it all together. Far from being a season of Joy, this time of year can be one of disappointment and grief.

Christmas is one example, sort of the cultural iconic example of looking ahead in anticipation, but of course we expect and wait for all kinds of things. We find ourselves always looking forward, always with expectations of how things ought to be or how we want them to be. And rarely, do they turn out that way.

John the Baptist, sitting in prison, hearing all these stories and accounts of what Jesus is out there doing in the world, is today, no stranger to disappointment. This was not how this was supposed to go. John had done the work of preparing the way; spending years in the wilderness calling the people to repentance, John did his part, so what is Jesus been doing?

In last week's gospel reading John tells the Pharisees and the Sadducees that "the ax is now lying at the root of the trees"; a not so veiled threat that judgement is coming to us all and even more so for those that lead others astray. John did everything he was supposed, fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah and now, now he finds himself in prison while the one he thought he was preparing the way for is out in the world doing everything but cutting down those that have led others astray.

John, it seems, was expecting a warrior king, a strong man to come and enact swift justice. So when he hears what Jesus has been doing he can't help but ask the question, "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?"

John's despair and doubt are perhaps to be expected. After all, from a prison cell, with no idea what kind of term he would be serving, what kind of future can one truly be holding out hope for? This is not how it was supposed to be. "Are you the one...?"

Yet out of John's despair comes a response from Jesus. Jesus says go and tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive sight, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. Go and tell all this, this is the message that I have come to share, the message of God's Judgement through creating something new, through transformation, through life. Go and tell John that God's justice is not cutting others down, but lifting others up. God's justice is transforming the ways of the world into newness, into life. That is what Jesus is doing. In a world that worships violence and death, Jesus brings life. Jesus knows that this is not what some had expected.

Those who take no offense at the things he is doing, and the miracles he is performing and the people he is spending time with, the people on street corners, the unclean, the lowly, to these Jesus has come. Those that take no offense are blessed. Those that see what Jesus is doing and follow are blessed.

But expectations are hard to let go of, and how much more so of the expectations we have for God. It is possible, sisters and brothers, that some of us or some of those closest to us are like John today, disappointed with God. Like John we may have expected something else for our lives, expected someone else to be with us this time of year, or expected our lives to look different at this point. This time of year we can feel guilty for feeling disappointment. We can feel disappointed for feeling disappointed. After all "It's the most wonderful time of year" as Andy Williams croons.

But, like John who was reassured by this because Jesus responded to John's question, God is not disappointed with us. To John's disappointment Jesus spoke hope, he invited John to see God in the world around him. Disappointed, God's Word came to John anyway, Just as God comes to us anyway, to hold us in our insecurity, or our fear, our anxiety, our grief. Sisters and brothers, God in Jesus came not for the strong and the proud, but to the weak and vulnerable. In other words, God through Jesus came for us. God is with us, like it or not.

This time of year for all its anticipation and excitement also has with it pain and suffering. All that lead up to Christmas can give way to disappointment when things don't go as we expected them to go, when Life does not turn out as we had expected, we are not alone in those moments. God is with us. In this knowledge lies our strength, our courage, and our hope. *Amen.*