

## **“Greater Expectations”**

### **Advent 3A: Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-12**

#### **Scriptures: Isaiah 35:1-10**

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35:1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus  
35:2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.  
35:3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.  
35:4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."  
35:5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
35:6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;  
35:7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.  
35:8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
35:9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.  
35:10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

#### **Matthew 11:2-11**

11:2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples  
11:3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"  
11:4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:  
11:5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.  
11:6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."  
11:7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?  
11:8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.  
11:9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.  
11:10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'  
11:11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

#### **Proclamation of the Word**

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Advent is about waiting, and waiting is hard work. Ask any kid in the back seat on a long trip going to Grandma's house on Christmas Eve where all the cousins, gifts, and goodies are awaiting them. Waiting is hard because of the anticipation that something good, special, and desperately hoped for is about to happen.

That is where we meet John the Baptist today in this portion of Scripture. He is sitting in prison- and there is not much to do in prison but to wait. Wait and think, wait and pray, wait and see...

John, along with his ancestors in faith, had been waiting on the Messiah for hundreds of years. Waiting and expecting things to get better, for the rule of God to take place.

Waiting for an important event allows time for the questions to crop up. Along the way doubts and anxieties can crop up, even as one hopes expectantly.

You know, the month before the wedding date- the questions arise

“Can we do this? How will this change my life?”

Anxiety along the way to expecting a child may crop up-

“Can we do this? How will this change my life?”

Just ask the person leaving a stable career to pursue his dream or looking for a job to put food on the table asking, “Can I do this? How will this change my life?”

Those of us who have heard Christmas music since November, hung the garlands, planned the parties, bought lots of gifts...get jarred by Matthew’s sudden stop along the way of Advent. We are barreling along at the speed limit (or beyond) and John the Baptist places the brakes on the whole situation asking about Jesus, “Are you the one we are waiting for or should we look for another?”

That’s strange- I thought we were all on our way to Bethlehem, finding fresh straw for the manger bed, and looking for a star to follow. What an abrupt question from John the Baptist. It just goes to show that we Presbyterian Christians have really never known what to do with this hairy, locust eating prophet who is gathers crowds in the wilderness.

The prophets and the rabbi, speak of “the One who is to come” or the Messiah and for hundreds of years the people of God have been waiting...but for whom have they been waiting?

Many have been looking for a national King to kick the Romans out of their country and to establish the Jews as a self-ruled theocracy.

Others expected that when things got bad, really bad where things like war, pestilence, drought, and famine had wreaked havoc on the world that the Messiah would come to rule and establish a heavenly order.

Even our friend, John the Baptist has some expectations. After he baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, he proclaims with confidence that Jesus, “... will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12)

No wonder John is wondering if this is God’s guy asking, “Are you the one we are waiting for or should we look for another?” Jesus does not appear to be kicking butt and taking names.

The Advent and Christmas season is wrought with so many expectations some of which can feel burdensome. We have high expectations for this season.

Consider **the pressure from advertisers** and Madison Avenue to spend, spend, spend with no concern for financial limits so that many folks are left in debt because of Christmas. Others forego necessary items like medicine and food to provide some of the stuff.

Consider the expectations of happiness with images of **happy, well-adjusted children and family** gatherings when some folks are struggling with their relationships and tensions, or feel abjectly alone.

Consider the **expectations on our time**. We lose ourselves in the Christmas rush so that we have not had time to tune our ears to God who is trying to get our attention.

My friend, Hugh, a pastor, says that the biggest problem in the church and I would add in many situations is **UNMET EXPECTATIONS**. We expect something from our church, our leadership, our school, our family and friends. We are disappointed when others do not meet our expectations. The gap between the expectation and reality is frustrating.

I think this is where we find John today sitting in a prison cell and hearing about what Jesus is doing. The doubts are setting in.... John is hearing about what is going on...thinking this is not at all what he expects of Jesus. John sends his friends asking "Are you the one we are waiting for or should we look for another?" Jesus responds, **Tell John what you hear and see...the actions of the kingdom, the work of the Messiah:**

**the blind receive their sight,  
the lame walk,  
the lepers are cleansed,  
the deaf hear,  
the dead are raised,  
the poor have good news brought to them.  
And blessed is anyone who takes no offense in me.**

John expected fire and brimstone, the separation of the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff being burned. John has great expectations of the Messiah, but Jesus had something greater in mind. God in Jesus Christ will set the agenda for the Kingdom.

Jesus still has something greater in mind.

And those who seek this Jesus- born in a manger- born to give us second birth- born to bring new life are called to do the same. Jesus was born for a purpose and a mission. God brings light into dark places and new birth to the world. We are called to be partners with God in that mission: to seek out the lost and lonely, to bring good news, food shelter to the poor through things like gifts that give. We are called to be personally involved as God became personally involved with us by coming in human form.

Just as this is an unexpected Advent scripture, we know that God works in unexpected ways. I want to tell you a real, live Christmas story.

Jennifer who works in the nursery of her church is a young woman who delivered a son right before Thanksgiving. Births- they happen every day. Jennifer is now the mother of three. Jennifer is from Finland, has never met her father, and her mother still lives there. The father of her children, Mark, is serving time at the local Justice Center, a nice word for prison, where he is forced to deal with the demons of his addiction and drug use along with poor financial decisions. Soon after he was arrested, Jennifer was to give birth to their baby. To make matters worse, the week the baby was due, she and the children were kicked out of her rental house. What a horrible situation...Jennifer gave birth alone in the hospital.

The first person she called was the pastor. You see this church has been her family. She was destined to be a homeless mother with a new baby, until her church family stepped in. Another young couple, members of the church, had their first child last winter and the baby had suddenly died in May. This young couple had closed off the baby's nursery like a tomb, removed the personal items, and left the room untouched until...

...they heard of Jennifer's situation. Her other two children were being cared for by Mark's parents, but there was no room in the home for Jennifer and baby.

And this couple at church heard about Jennifer and decided they had a perfectly good nursery ready to be used.

The nursery, sealed off because of their deep, deep grief,  
was opened in order that someone might have a home,  
that someone might have new life.

That nursery that had been a silent tomb is now filled with the whimpers of a child and his mother who now has been given a second chance. Jennifer and the baby boy are living there as long as needed. There is room in the inn! Both families received a second birth of new life.

Sitting in prison, waiting and wondering about the future, the father Mark wrote his church:

*I used to think that churches were full of people who pretended to be happy to see you once a week, then forget about you for 6 more days. I'm glad I was finally proven wrong by our church. I can only hope that someday I will be able to help someone in need the way you have helped us. I won't pretend that I am not miserable in this jail, being away from Jennifer and my children. I'm also not going to overlook the fact that I have let them all down, yet again. But in a way, I am glad to be here, because this is the only place I believe God could have gotten my full attention again. I have given my life over to the Lord in the past, but it seems like I was almost immediately sucked back in by worldly things. I pray every day that that doesn't happen again. I know I need God in my life, but sometimes I feel like I don't know how to keep him after the bad times have gone. I know I want to be a good person, to help others, and to have a strong, loving family. I just always forget how and ultimately take it all for granted. I'm not sure what my point is here, except to say that I know that I can't make this journey on my own.*

Mark did not get what he expected from God and God's church, he received more. The church was a channel through which God became present and real again.

Thanks be to God that we don't always get what we expect!

Sometimes we get something greater, something better. The presence of God comes near.

Jesus is present even now by sharing in our brokenness as the bread, his body is broken.

He shares in our sufferings and life, even as the wine, his blood is poured out.

In sharing himself with us, we are commanded to share life together.

We consume his very life and become his body in the world with that same mission and that same purpose.

Our lives and this church are the inn, the vessel, in which the baby Jesus will be born again.

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