

Sermon for December 11, 2016 – Advent 3

Matthew 11:2-11 (EHV)

Theme: **Our Christmas Expectations.**

- 1) *Ask Him Who He is*
- 2) *Listen to His Servant, who uses His Word*

²While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples ³to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?”⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go, report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.”⁷As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Have you ever purchased a product that you imagined would make your life better – only to find out that it didn’t live up to your expectations? I can’t tell you how often this has happened to me. Now, even though I can blame a product’s marketing claims for my false expectations, I often must take some of the blame as well. All too often I either don’t read the product description carefully or take the time to learn how to use it properly. And do you know what happens when I take the time to use it correctly? I often start to like it better for what it is instead of what I imagined it would be.

What kind of expectations do you have for Christ? What kind of Savior do you imagine him to be? Are your expectations of him correct – based on God’s Word? With our sermon text as our guide, let us reevaluate **Our Christmas Expectations for the Christ.** 1) *Ask Him Who He is.* 2) *Listen to His Servant, who uses His Word*

Part 1: Ask Him Who He is

Our sermon text takes place well into Jesus’ ministry. At this time John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod for preaching against his adulterous relationship with Herodias.

²While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples ³to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?”

Wait a second: did we hear this right? Is John the Baptist, the very forerunner of the Messiah who not only directed people to Jesus by saying, “*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*”ⁱ but also heard God the Father say at Jesus’ baptism, “*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*”ⁱⁱⁱ – is this the man who sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus whether or not he was the promised Christ? How can this be?

In order to understand John’s question, we should take a little time to review his ministry. As the forerunner of the Messiah, John lived a very ascetic lifestyle in order to draw attention to his message. He preached very strong law and Gospel – warning people to receive the forgiveness the Messiah offered through repentance and faith, lest they be cut down by his justice and thrown into the unquenchable fires of hell.

His bold preaching got himself thrown into jail. And there he sat – waiting for the Messiah to bring about the justice the Old Testament Scriptures promised he would bring.

But John’s disciples brought back confusing reports about Jesus. Some wondered why he and his disciples didn’t fast like they did. Others wondered why he was willing to associate with public sinners, tax collectors and even the odd Gentile. Jesus gives us some insight as to what people thought about him, when he said, “*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.’*”ⁱⁱⁱ

And there sat poor John in prison, neither able to verify nor explain the reports he heard. Can you imagine how the devil must have tempted him? “The Scriptures say that the Messiah is going to judge the world with justice in order to bring relief to the oppressed. If Jesus is the Messiah, why are you sitting here in prison – oppressed? Are you sure you put your faith in the right guy?”

Yes, in prison poor John sat – unable to see and hear Jesus himself. His faith was under attack. What would he do? The only thing He could: send some of his disciples straight to the source! He asked Jesus to reassure him that he is the Messiah.

Some people think that John’s sending of his disciples to ask Jesus this question was a sign of weakness, doubt, and possibly of a loss of faith. No! John’s actions were a sign of strength, confidence and doing the right thing. Oh, that all believers would do what John did! Instead of speculating and trying to figure out things on his own, John rightly let Jesus himself drive his doubts away. Yes, sending his disciples to Jesus was an act of faith, because Jesus’ words would settle the matter for John.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when Satan attacks your faith – tempting you to wonder whether or not God really cares or exists with all the hatred, sorrow, crime and injustice in the world - don’t try to tough these temptations out. If John, the greatest (human) prophet ever born, knew that he couldn’t overcome temptation on his own, what makes you think you can? No, do as John did: go to God in prayer – asking him to reassure you of his power, presence and love. Read the Bible and let God himself settle the matter for you in His Word.

Jesus addresses John's concerns by telling his disciples: *"Go, report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.*

Instead of just saying, "Yes, I am the Messiah," Jesus let John's disciples experience this truth for themselves. By inviting them to report back what they saw and heard, Jesus led them to see how his miracles, his preaching and the Old Testament Scriptures all proved that He was the Messiah. Yes, John was right to expect Jesus to judge the world with justice, but that day of judgement lay in the future. Right now Jesus was fulfilling his other work of bringing comfort, healing and salvation through his Gospel ministry – the culmination of which would be the sacrifice of himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins so that, whoever repents and believes in him might have eternal life. *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*^{iv}

Jesus says: *⁶Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.*" This is like saying: Blessed is the man who doesn't have false expectations about me, but allows the Holy Spirit to teach him through Scripture.

Part 2: Listen to His Servant, who uses His Word

⁷As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?"

This is a very profound question. What did the people expect to hear and see when they went to see John the Baptist? And we should ask ourselves the same question: What do we expect to hear and see when we come to worship to listen to our pastor preach?

Do you expect to see *a reed shaken by the wind* – that is, someone who only tells us what we want to hear: that you are a basically good person who doesn't have to worry about sinning – that all you have to do is believe in yourself and do what feels good for you?

⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? In other words, do you go to church merely to be entertained with a flashy show, upbeat music and a self-affirming message? *No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.* That is to say: true ministers of the Gospel, like John the Baptist are not entertainers. You don't go to them for a show.

Jesus asks: *⁹So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, 'Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'* *¹¹Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist.*

According to Jesus, John the Baptist wasn't just any old prophet: he was the Messiah's special forerunner. And did you know that, other than Jesus, John is the only other prophet prophesied about in Scripture? Therefore, it's of the utmost importance that we take special note of John's message, even today! Why? Because his message is still relevant – especially in view of Jesus'

return. The preparations the Jews needed to make for the Messiah's first coming are no different than the preparations God wants us to make for his second coming.

And what is John's message for us today? It's the same message that has been preached from every faithful pulpit since Pentecost: *"Repent, (that is: turn away from sin and to your Savior) for the kingdom of heaven is near."*^v He points to Jesus and says: *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*^{vi} Repent of your transgressions and follow him in faith for he has come to forgive all your sins. But watch out if you refuse to repent: for he is the promised Messiah who will judge the nations with justice. ¹⁰ *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*^{vii}

Yes, all that John says about Jesus is true, and we are not to neglect any part of his message! God wants us to have a proper expectation of who Jesus is: both regarding his law as well as his Gospel.

Sadly there are many people who focus so much on the gracious love God has for us poor sinners in Christ and they begin to falsely assert that God's law has no place in our preaching. They falsely suppose that Jesus didn't just save us from our sins, but also excuses our pursuit of them. Such people reason: "God is love and accepts us for who we are. He wants us to be happy in life, therefore I can pursue ungodly relationships and do whatever else my heart desires." And aren't we often tempted to think the same? Don't we also excuse sinning with the thought that Christ will forgive me in the end? Oh how we cheapen his grace and love when we do that! How low our expectations of the Christ become. Jesus was not born to be our buddy. He was born to be our Savior. He is our God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: as you prepare to celebrate Christmas – don't let your hearts be filled with false expectation as to who Jesus is and what he came to do. Make every effort to listen to the Scriptures tell you exactly who Jesus is and why we can rejoice in him. He is the Savior, the perfect Lamb of God who offered himself up for the sins of the world. He is our righteous LORD who will come again at the end of time to judge the world with equity. All who repentantly put their trust in him will receive eternal life – all because of what he came to accomplish the first time He made himself known on this earth.

This is what Christmas is all really all about. Amen.

ⁱ John 1:29 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Mark 9:7 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 11:19 NIV84

^{iv} John 3:17 NIV84

^v Matthew 3:2 NIV84

^{vi} John 1:29 NIV84

^{vii} Matthew 3:10 NIV84