

Sermon on Matthew 11:2-11
3rd Sunday in Advent, December 11, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

What a difference a week makes. Just last Sunday we heard John the Baptist introduce Jesus with bold and strong words: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!”* John was like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, quoting Isaiah, saying: *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!”* He spoke of the one whom God was sending, who was much more powerful than himself. *“I baptize you with water for repentance...He will baptize you 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.”* You heard all this last week from the gospel. John the Baptist expected quite a lot from the coming Messiah, who then appeared right before him at the Jordan River, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So John baptized Jesus and saw the heavens opened up, the Spirit of God alighting on Jesus, and a voice from heaven saying: *This is my beloved Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* Yes, John’s expectations were high!

Fast forward to chapter 11 of Matthew, read today. John’s confidence in Jesus being the Messiah seems to turn to doubt. Jesus was out and about in Galilee, preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, and healing people from their diseases. Not exactly fire from heaven, but Jesus was drawing crowds. Still, John hadn’t seen the Son of Man coming in the clouds, or the baptism with fire, burning the wicked like chaff on the threshing floor. What was going on here? And besides, now John the Baptist’s boldness in preaching a baptism of repentance had reached King Herod, whom John accused of the sin of adultery, for taking his own brother’s wife into his bed. The King was not amused, nor was the new Queen, so now John the Baptist was arrested and thrown into prison. Where was the Messiah, now? This is when doubt and questions began to sink in.

John the Baptist needed some clarity, so he sent word to Jesus through his disciples, asking him: *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”* It seems a very fair question, seeing that John had introduced Jesus so powerfully, and now he was stuck in this tiny, dark dungeon, in the fortress at Machaerus, five miles east of the Dead Sea. Now John wanted to know for sure. And here is Jesus’ answer:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Boom.

So there was no “Messiah” coming in Jesus who would appear out of the clouds of heaven, strike down evil doers and rescue John from his prison cell, or cast out corrupt rulers from their palaces or temples. Jesus’ mission was different. His work was that described by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 61, who said: *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...to comfort all who mourn, to give them a garland instead of ashes.”*

So John’s disciples left Jesus, to report back to the Baptist in prison. Jesus then asked the crowds about John the Baptist, saying, *“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.’ 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.”* Then Jesus compared John to the prophet Elijah who is to come – if they, the people, were willing to accept it.

So, it is clear from Matthew that John the Baptist – no matter how great a prophet – was not “the one”. Jesus was clearly “the one” – the Messiah whom Matthew and the gospel writers proclaimed to be the Messiah, the anointed one sent by God. But Jesus wasn’t all that they had expected – maybe nothing at all that was expected – he came as someone totally different. So it all came down to expectations. In Jesus, God had a great surprise in store for them all – and for us.

So this is one of the great questions for the Advent season of preparation: ***who are you expecting?*** Or to put it in another way, *is Jesus the one for whom you have waited – for whom we all wait, in faithful expectation?* As they say on tv: good question!

We in the Church are used to making bold, grand proclamations about Jesus – the Son of God, our Savior – especially at great festivals like Christmas or Easter. We proclaim to the world that Jesus is our King, our Shepherd, our great high priest, our friend. On Christmas Eve we sing with Isaiah that *a son has been born for us, a son given to us, and he is named: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!*

We certainly can be bold when we are together, safely here in God’s sanctuary of the Church! As well we should be! And then there are those times when we are not so confident, when you and I are alone, in our homes, at work, out in the street, when we don’t speak so boldly about our Lord. When we might be discouraged, or afraid, when those nagging doubts set in. Is Jesus REALLY who we in the Church say he is? What about those times when the world seems to be

crumbling around us, when people are afraid, and hate speech seems so easy and acceptable. Do you ever have those times, when you feel *doubt*, and not boldness?

I do. All the time. Martin Luther said that any preacher who didn't feel doubt and terror every time he or she climbed into the pulpit to preach the Word of God was either a fool or a charlatan. When I had to stand in front of this church last Tuesday and proclaim to the world – through the press gathered where you are sitting today – to *declare sanctuary, a place of safety here, to undocumented immigrants who risk deportation because of their lack of legal documents – I knew that the only ground I had to stand on is the Word of God, my faith, and the support of the 75 or so clergy and leaders standing beside and behind me on these steps*. We have no security or police protection, we have no weapons, we don't even know if we have legal protection – outside of the *tradition* that police or immigration enforcement will not enter a church to remove a person unless we ask for it or allow it. That's it. So this is where doubt and fear can set in.

Otherwise, it's easy to preach the Word, when you are among Lutherans in such a safe place as this! But John the Baptist was in prison, not baptizing by the Jordan, so he began to feel doubts. The disciples were bold when they followed Jesus in Galilee and even into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, with the friendly crowds. But alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and alone in the house after Jesus was crucified – before Jesus appeared with them - THEN they doubted! When you and I are on our own, not in Sunday worship, and have to face our own fears and isolation, that is when we have doubts!

So who are you expecting in Jesus, and in this Church? Is it the picture you see in this stained glass window, a good shepherd holding a lamb in his arms? This is not real – it's only an image, a picture. Are you expecting a mighty savior coming down out of the clouds? You haven't seen him yet. Who do you expect? Think about that. I can't answer that question for you – only you can know that. I can only proclaim the one whom the scriptures tells us to expect – *the one who makes the deaf to hear, the blind to see, the lame to walk, makes lepers clean, raises the dead, and brings good news to the poor!*

People have all kinds of questions and expectations about Jesus, and about the Church, and what it does or should do. Most of those expectations are probably wrong. We can only do what we can do, as humble witnesses to the faith and trust we have in God, in God's Word, and in the Jesus whom we know. We can read God's Word out loud, and seek to learn from it together. We can sing praise to God who made us. We can ask forgiveness from God and our neighbor. We can baptize with water the people who come in faith and seek to follow Jesus. We can share God's peace with one another, and reconcile with those whom we have wronged or declare forgiveness. We can share the bread and wine to anyone who comes to the Lord's table, which we believe and teach is the body and blood

of Christ. Then go out from this place and seek to do God's will, as witnesses to God's love by loving our neighbors and making peace, in the name of Jesus. We can proclaim bold things, such as sanctuary for the undocumented, shelter for families in housing emergency, or good news of justice for the poor. This is all we can do, honestly, and to say we do any more is presumptuous.

But this is quite a lot! We expect quite a bit out of the Church (which is US, the body of Christ in the world) – and so we should! We expect a lot from God, and from Jesus our Lord – and we should – but we should expect the right things, which God tells us to expect through the Word, the law, the prophets and the gospel! And so you have heard it today: we proclaim Jesus Christ, the one whom God has sent to make the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf to hear, raise the dead, and bring good news to the poor. Our mission, if we choose to accept it, as those who are baptized in Jesus' name, is to follow him and be witnesses to his love for God, for one another and for our neighbor. *What else can anyone expect?* Thanks be to God! Amen.