

Did you get what you expected?
Matthew 11:2-11

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Year A, Christmas 1

What were you expecting for Christmas?

- I imagine that some of you had pretty clear wish lists of what you wanted in the way of gifts!
- I imagine that others – perhaps families with children who have left home or parents who are far away were especially looking forward to having everyone together. I know that my wife and I were especially looking forward to that and we certainly got that!
- I know that Christmas can be a difficult period for some people: what some people were expecting leading up to Christmas was that it would be a difficult time. The wife of a parishioner in my church died last year just before Christmas and this man told me just before Christmas how difficult it was going to be for him. That was also true for my wife's father; Rachel's mum died just after Thanksgiving.

The point is that many people were expecting many different things for Christmas, some gifts, some family, some a tough time.

For almost a thousand years, the people of Israel had been in expectation for almost a thousand years for one who would sit on the throne of the great king David, the one whom Isaiah prophesied would bring all nations under the sway of the one God.

We Christians celebrate Christmas as the birth date of our Lord Jesus, the one that we believe fulfilled that expectation. We don't know what day Jesus was born, but for almost 2000 years the church has celebrated this time of the year as the time when the hopes and fears of all the years were seen in Bethlehem in the form of that child. Though we don't know the exact day of Jesus' birth, we do know that Jesus is the greatest gift that this world has every received, short of its creation by the same God and Father. It was a gift of pure godliness and godfulness.

But, was it the gift that the people of Israel expected? No. In fact, we know well that Jesus was anything but what the people of Israel expected. What they expected was a ruler, a king whom God would bring to them, a ruler who would crush all oppression.

Jesus' uncle, Zechariah, the father of Jesus' cousin John (who would later be known as "the Baptist"), sums it up well not once but twice: he will liberate us from our enemies and from all those who hate us. This is a people that sat under the yoke of foreign oppression, and occupation of their country, for over 500 years! When God liberates them, they expect that it will be thorough and complete, and that it will be violent.

And don't think that this is just a male expectation. In Middle Eastern countries, the women can be just as keen on the violent and thorough cleansing of the land as their men. They are happy to send their sons off to do battle and even to become martyrs, or to go to battle themselves if there is no man who can rid the land of the enemy. Remember Jael. Remember Judith. These were women who, in the history of Israel acted heroically to cleanse their land of the foreign invader: Judith took the sword to the head of the evil Gentile king Holofernes, while Jael took the tent peg and drove it into the skull of the evil Gentile king Sisera. In both cases, these women are hymned for their actions with the words: "blessed are you among women, Jael", "blessed are you among women, Judith". And so it is that Zechariah's wife, the mother of John the Baptist, Jesus' aunt, Mary's cousin: when she receives the pregnant Mary at her home, Elizabeth cries out with joy and in expectation exclaims: "blessed are you, Mary, among all women and blessed is the child you are carrying". What she is saying is not "oh, how beautiful, a pregnant woman; how fortunate you are", but rather "finally, the woman who, through the child that she carries, will do away with Gentile oppression once and for all". Elizabeth's words and even the song of Mary that follows are war songs, not songs of peace. Their expectation is that their children, John and Jesus, are the vanguard of God's righteous vengeance that will break forth in the world, turn the tables on the powerful, and cleanse the world once and for all of the hated Gentiles.

Why even John the Baptist was raised with this expectation. For 30 years or more, John was schooled by his family and by those around him, that he had a special ministry, a ministry of preparing the way, a ministry of creating this expectation and announcing its fulfilment. And when the time came, John went into the wilderness and began to proclaim that the time had finally arrived, and the expectation was to be fulfilled: as Isaiah had written, God was going to shake the foundations of the earth, making the mountains collapse and fall and filling the deep valleys with the rubble, making Israel into a smooth plain. John cried out that even now the axe was laid to the root of the tree, and the Messiah was going to appear, first to cleanse Israel of all corruption so as finally to move on to cleanse the world of the hated Gentiles, the chaff whom the wind of God would blow away or burn with unquenchable fire. "Joy to the world"? How about: "set fire to the world and purify it from all evil! Joy to Israel, which will reap the whirlwind of God!"

What did the people of Israel expect that first Christmas? They expected one who would grow to manhood and would take the sword, mount his charger, ride into the streets of Jerusalem, lead the people into a final war, and bring the whole world under the sway of the one God, the Lord, the God of Israel. What an expectation!

And so, what a disappointment that Christmas must have been. Everything that the people of Israel expected and hoped for failed to happen when this child grew.

True,

- Jesus was born among shepherds, a good omen that he would be like his father, David, a shepherd.

- And there were angels who announced his birth, not just one, but the whole host of heaven (host = army!)
- And his birth created fear in the heart of that godless Gentile king who ruled over Israel, Herod, who in fact decided to kill all the children under 2 so as to rid himself of this threat to his power.

But, when Jesus grew to manhood, the last thing on his mind appears to have been to take up the sword, ride into Jerusalem, and to slay the corrupt leadership of Israel before starting his conquest of the world, a greater task than that that faced even Alexander the Great. Jesus appeared, announced the kingdom of God, and began to minister healing and proclaim forgiveness to all those whom the people would have liked to take through the streets and lynch or stone: the adulteress woman, the prostitute, the spy who collaborates with the army of occupation – whom we euphemistically call “tax collector” – the sinner. They expected someone who would reap vengeance; what they got was someone who told them to love their enemies, who touched the lives of Roman soldiers, and who never once struck back at someone who hated him, and who in the end died forgiving even those who nailed him to the cross.

Even John’s expectations of the Messiah were disappointed. John the Baptist served God faithfully, expectantly, hoping that he would be the one who would inaugurate the reign of the vengeful king of Israel, who was even imprisoned for his faithful labour of preaching. John expected godliness, but his godliness was not God’s godliness; it was the creation of God in man’s image, an image of spiteful vengeance, unforgiveness, and the intractable rule of law, as opposed to the rule of mercy and grace and infinitely forgiving love.

And so John sent to Jesus from prison a message: how could I have been so wrong in my expectation? Aren’t you the one we expected?

But rather than rebuke John, Jesus sends back a message:

‘No, you are not wrong about me being the one: all that Isaiah wrote would happen, is happening:

- The blind are seeing
- The lame are walking
- The lepers are being cleansed
- The deaf are hearing
- Why, even the dead are being raised to life
- And the poor are hearing good news for the first time ever.

‘But, John, you were wrong in how it would happen: it is happening now, through me and it will come to fruition in my death. The earth will not be swept clean of evil before all these things happen; but I will die and then good will spring forth and no one will prevent it from spreading. It will be a wildfire, but it will not destroy: it will give life.’

John certainly didn't expect this answer. We sometimes think: well, John must have understood Jesus? But, no. John's role was limited. Yes, he was a prophet. Yes, he was great. But, it is you and I who are even greater than John, because we know where Jesus was going. We know that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor hear good news, even the dead are raised **because** Jesus, in God's plan, did not take the life and blood of others, but gave His own life, and that in giving his life the spread of life can never be turned back. We know that the earth was not and has been swept clean of all evil, but we also know that where the blood of Christ fell to earth, new life sprang forth from the earth and continues to spring forth today.

My friends, you and I know that the Lord God has entered our world. He has entered our nation, our church, even our lives. What do we expect?

If we would follow the pattern that is set forth in the pages of Scripture, we should expect

- That God will continue to give graciously and abundantly to all in need, not making distinction of who they are or what they call themselves,
- That we should do likewise, without asking questions first, without determining what these people to whom we give will do with what we give them (after all, we don't know that the Jew who was rescued by the Good Samaritan went on to become a disciple of Jesus or Barabbas the criminal)
- That our lives will begin to resemble that of Jesus as we give, for as we give in the name of Christ, God will pour forth ever more into our lives, more abundantly than we can ask or imagine
 - Not just materially, though there is something of that
 - But especially "pour forth into our lives" those gifts of the Spirit that will enable us to live a Jesus-kind of life in our world:
 - **grace and mercy** of God, instead of those grudges that we hang on to and the desire for a pay-back
 - **peace and truth**, instead of a life lived in competition with others and the lies necessary to live such a life,
 - **hope and faith** in eternal life lived with God, where for many, life ends at death,
 - **service and self-giving**, where there is only self-seeking and acquisition,
 - and all this with great, and godly **joy** that shines from us.

These are the continuing Christmas gifts of God, completely unexpected by the world, but the gifts that you and I, as children of God, should regularly expect from God. But remember: even though you and I expect them, and we should expect them, God's giving will ALWAYS surpass our best imagination.

Did you get what you wanted for Christmas? Maybe. But, now let us hope for even more, from a God who never tires of giving to a world that He loves and for which He gave His Son.