

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT (A)

Matthew 11:2-11
December 16, 2007

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastor Frank Terhune tells the story of searching for the perfect anniversary card for his wife. He thought he had just the card. The front read, *"Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers."* But then he opened it up, and discovered that it wasn't quite right. On the inside, the card read: *"You're not what I prayed for exactly, but apparently you're the answer!"*

That card may sum up what's happening in today's Gospel.

For hundreds of years the people of God had been praying for the Messiah to come. In their hopes and dreams, the Messiah would be one who would lead them to triumph over their enemies — one who would usher in a time of prosperity and peace. When the Messiah comes, Rome would be overthrown and replaced with God's kingdom of righteousness.

Some anticipated that the long-promised Savior would be a powerful warrior. Under his leadership, Israel would once again experience political hegemony and blessedness. For generations, the Jews prayed and waited.

Like the rest of Israel, John the Baptist expected the Messiah to be this mighty deliverer, someone who would speak the Word of God with power. Indeed, last week, we heard John announce that the one coming would speak with *"the Holy Spirit and with fire!"*

It would seem that John was looking for a kind of vengeance, recompense, payback. One could understand if he was dreaming of the fires from heaven raining down and scorching every Roman that occupied Israel, and every hypocritical religious leader who did not shepherd the people.

But it was apparently not to be. For John finds himself in prison, discouraged and dismayed. John had opened his mouth and declared God's Word to all who would listen. He had prophesied. He told everyone, including King Herod, what God thought of their lifestyle. When he dared call Herod an adulterer for marrying his brother's wife, he crossed the line, and Herod's wife became so angry she arranged to have John executed.

John knew his days were numbered. So, he wondered if he would really see the Messiah's arrival. He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, *"Are you in fact the one? Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?"*

Sitting in prison, John wasn't sure. He liked what he heard from Jesus, especially the talk about justice and the Kingdom of God. But Jesus wasn't exactly living up to the job description of Messiah that John was expecting.

Jesus wasn't from cosmopolitan Jerusalem. Sure, he was born in the city of David — in Bethlehem, but he was raised in hick country, Nazareth of Galilee. Jesus was the son of a simple carpenter, and he hung around with questionable

friends — sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, shepherds, and fishermen.

Where was the impressive white stallion to lead the troops in battle? Instead of a mighty general, John saw the “Prince of Peace.” Where were the armies? Surely the twelve following Jesus weren’t going to overthrow Caesar’s legions.

If Jesus was God’s answer to years of Jewish prayers for deliverance, well — he wasn’t exactly what they’d been praying for. There’s nothing more disappointing or discouraging than expecting one thing and receiving something else.

Advent is the season of hopes and dreams and expectations. Just as Israel and John the Baptist had hopes and expectations, so do we. We, too, pray for a Messiah who will deliver us from terrorism and the ravages of our enemies. And what do we get? Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who tells us to *love our enemies*, do good to those who curse us, and pray for those who persecute us.

We, too, pray for the justice of God to rain fire from heaven to destroy those who might attack us. And what do we get? Jesus, who blesses the merciful, and asks what good is it if you only forgive those who are kind to you?

We too, pray for a Messiah who will keep us from all pain and suffering. And what do we get? Jesus, who says “take up your cross and follow me.” We get Jesus who tells us the only way to find real life is to *lose* your life for him, and for the sake of the Gospel.

Jesus doesn’t fit our expectations of a Messiah. He isn’t exactly what we prayed for, but he is God’s answer to our prayers.

We look for one who will keep us free from all suffering and pain. But that’s not who we get. We get Jesus, who enters into our suffering and pain, bringing peace and hope, but not an immediate end of all suffering. Jesus comes to us where we hurt, and he joins us in that hurt. Indeed, he bids us give it all to him on the cross, and in return he gives healing, strength and endurance.

We look for one who will make us healthy, wealthy and wise. But that’s not who we get. We get Jesus, who tells us not to lay up treasures on earth, but rather treasures in heaven, and to give to those who ask from you. (Mt 6:19,20) We get Jesus who is a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Cor 1:23)

We look for a superman messiah who will save us from death. But that’s not who we get. We get Jesus who instead enters into death for us. We get Jesus — who leads the way through death, who leads us through death, and crushes its power.

Jesus tells John the Baptist to look around. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised. The Messiah who is beyond our expectations has come.

In his book, *For All God’s Worth*, Anglican Bishop Tom Wright expresses the hope and fulfillment of the Messiah like this. He writes:

What will it look like when God comes back to Jerusalem?

*Isaiah's answer is that it will **not** be a blaze of glory.
 It will **not** be in the form of a great military display of power.
 It will be in the life of one who takes upon himself
 the form of a **servant**, and is obedient unto death.
 This is how God will comfort his people;
 this is how the bridegroom will return to Zion;
 this is why Advent is good news,
 why we know that God is a shepherd
 who carries the lambs in his bosom,
 and gently leads those that are with young.
 To a world besotted with the love of power,
 Isaiah's God reveals himself in the power of love.*

*Whom did you expect? A King who is easily observed and readily identified
 by his royal garb and his flock of attendants? One whose image is plastered on
 political posters and carried by the mass media?*

Those with eyes to see have missed him.

But the blind receive their sight.

*Whom did you expect? A Messiah borne on the shoulders of excited
 crowds? One whose very presence would command respect?*

Those with able bodies and minds go about their business.

But the lame walk.

*Whom did you expect? A leader who would deploy legions of angels to
 carry out the work of the Lord? One who would deal with the anxieties of the elite?*

But Jesus reaches out to untouchables.

And lepers are cleansed.

*Whom did you expect? A Christ whose teachings would be so sublime and
 obvious that all could easily understand?*

Those with perfect ears do not catch the message.

But the deaf hear.

*Whom did you expect? A politician who would realize that the world's
 power is in the hands of the wealthy? One whose attractiveness would get him
 invitations to all the right places?*

But the poor have the Good News preached to them.

*Whom did you expect? A baptizer of the status quo? One whose life and
 message would avoid scandals?*

But blessed are those who take no offense at Jesus.

*Whom did you expect? A prince who would bring instant happiness? One
 who would not dirty his hands with the mortuary business?*

But the dead are raised.

Whom did you expect ?

This is who we get — Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Credits: C.Frank Terhune, *Come Thou Unexpected Jesus*; DSA, *Synthesis*