

"What Do You Expect?"

The Third Sunday in Advent
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

December 12, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10;
James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Call it the last two weeks for shopping. Call it the last days before the celebration of Christmas. Call it Advent. Whatever you call these last few days before December the 25th, they're filled with expectation. Of course it's important to understand that we do not all share the same expectations for this season, and some of us will change our expectations as things unfold. In fact, it will be a season of mixed expectations. For some, it will be looking ahead to days of loneliness, emptiness, and yes for some, even despair. For others, it will hold the prospect of a break from work. And for others, it will be a time of wonderful celebration and reunion. So it is at this season of mixed expectations.

A couple of Christmases ago, I was filled with joy at the prospect of going to the Harrisburg airport to bring Mark, our son, home for Christmas. He was, of course, on one of the last flights in, and I was there at the airport, waiting for him to come through that old glass revolving door, if you remember it, to collect his baggage at the baggage claim. I was filled with excitement, with anticipation, and with expectation.

So were the people of Israel in John's time. They had their expectations, varied, though they were. They were waiting for the restoration of the monarchy, for the restoration of the nation. They yearned for the return of political independence, for freedom from Rome, and the breaking of the puppet rule of Herod. John himself had proclaimed that God was about to transform Israel. Had John not told the people that the kingdom of God was near, and that they had to prepare the way for the Lord?

The authorities tolerated John's message and popularity only so long. Once John began to level criticism at Herod and his personal conduct, the axe that John had spoken of as falling at the root of the tree of Israel, in fact fell on John's head. He was arrested and put into prison. Being imprisoned and being removed from the public eye, however, didn't alter John's expectations one bit. He was still convinced of the presence of the kingdom and the appearance of the Messiah. So it was, in prison, cut off from society, that John longed for word of the transformation he himself had prophesied. He was looking forward with great expectation to what God was going to do in Israel.

There I was in Harrisburg International Airport baggage claim with great expectations, as well. There was a stir in the crowd. The arrival screen was flashing an announcement. The expected flight had arrived. It was Mark's flight! Along with everybody else who was waiting for someone from that flight, I moved towards those revolving doors. You could feel the excitement grow in the crowd as we all looked down that long hallway to see who first would come around the corner and approach the revolving door. I watched. And I waited. I checked out every head

and every face I could see, as the weary line of late night travelers straggled towards the door. I looked everywhere for him. I couldn't wait to meet him. And . . . you guessed it. He wasn't there.

My feelings, my expectations, changed from one minute to the next. He had missed the plane – irresponsible! He'd been delayed somewhere along the way – just what you'd expect from the airlines! Did he have an accident on the way to the airport at Dallas? Was he sick? Surely they hadn't called him back to work! Where the . . . (I won't give you the words) was he?

There were a number of young men there like Mark. Many wore their hair the same way he did. A good number of them had similar colored hair, in fact. And many of them a similar build to Mark, so checked out everyone of them . . . not sure . . . just in case . . . it sounded like . . . maybe he was there.

John's experience in this morning's gospel is somewhat similar. What is it that moves John from being certain to being doubtful? He sends his disciples off to ask Jesus, Are you the one, or should we perhaps be waiting for someone else? Surely John knew what he was expecting. He's prophesied His coming. He'd baptized Him. But John was in prison, at the mercy of a monarch who would gladly put him to death, but delayed acting because he was afraid of how the populace might react to the execution of a prophet.

No wonder John had questions. But that was not the only thing troubling John. Jesus wasn't fulfilling his job description as John had laid it out for him. Jesus was definitely not the sort of messiah that John was expecting. John was looking for a mighty servant of God, who was coming to clean up the corrupt royalty, to expel Pharisees and Sadducees, and to clean up a polluted house of God. But there was no sign of divine retribution. There wasn't even a whisper of punishment, not even a spark of judgment fire. There was not the slightest sign that any of these criteria were being met by this Jesus, who was drawing vast crowds to listen to Him. Surely he couldn't be the Messiah, could he? Poor John, imprisoned by Herod and caught in the power of his own expectations.

It's precisely at that point that we are drawn into the reality of this gospel, and we're invited to start considering our own expectations, as to who and what Christ ought to be. Further, the gospel invites us to examine our expectations of what we think the body of Christ, the church, ought to be. And more, the gospel asks us to consider our expectations as to one another, as members of this congregation, as to what we ought to be. For isn't this the most painful ground, when our Christian experience and expectation of Christ, the Church, and Christ's people, are not what we really expect them to be?

Surely, then, we stand with John in his pain and perplexity, and find ourselves being prompted by the gospel if we can only muster John's courage and determination to ask ourselves one simple question: Are the expectations I have, which are not being met, realistic and worthy expectations? Or are they not?

John's intellectual integrity, the depth of his faithfulness in this sort of questioning, is extraordinary. Rather than rely on his prophesy, on his own expectations, he grits his teeth and sends his disciples directly to Jesus. How he must have wished to go himself. But his disciples

hurry off to ask the question of Jesus: Are you the one, or is there someone else we ought to be waiting for?

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus answers John's disciples, they are to tell John what they have seen, what Jesus is doing for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor. Later in Matthew's account there will be judgment, but not at this point in the story. Jesus' primary activity is the restoration of those in need and the giving of life to the lifeless and hope to the hopeless. Jesus is in fact, releasing people from the things about them that imprison them, from the things in their lives that cut them off, as it were, from the real presence of God. So, in what Jesus is doing, a great transformation takes place.

In just the same way, Christ sets us, you and me, free from what we expect, that we might be open to what it is that God in Christ is not only doing for us, but will do with us and through us. So God in Christ is preparing us. We're set free from sin and death and transformed to be the people of God. We're filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered and enabled to bring Christ's transforming presence into the world and in so doing, being greater than John could ever be. For you and I are called to be instruments of God's grace and channels of God's love, not only to one another in this congregation, to our families and to our friends, but to every individual we encounter through our long journey of life. So God, in and through Christ, enables us to act as channels whereby He might transform the world. Not that we should abandon expectations, but that we should most definitely examine those we have, especially those we cling to, and be open to the divine presence which in fact calls us to renew and revised expectations.

Mark still hadn't appeared in the corridor leading to the revolving glass doors. The last straggler from the plane was at the carousel, waiting with everyone else from the flight to collect baggage. I was desperately trying to check out every person there, looking for Mark. In front of me was the most annoying young man. He seemed to get in my line of vision everywhere I looked. When I moved, he moved, too. I silently fumed and thought what I would like to say to him, but he just didn't get out of my way. And then that young man got in my face and spoke to me, "Hi Dad!" It was Mark, standing grinning at me with sparkling eyes – bald as a billiard ball, his blond hair gone, he was completely shaved. Not what I was expecting at all!

Amen.