
SERMON – 3RD ADVENT
MATTHEW 11:2-15 AND PSALM 146
DECEMBER 15, 2019
“I WONDER WHAT’S INSIDE”

I confess to a double standard – a hypocrisy which like all hypocrisy is impossible to defend. I don't like to shop – it's never brought me joy to meander through a store looking at this or that or thumbing through a catalog (or its modern iteration the website) trying to spot that 'one thing' someone would appreciate if I were to present said thing as a gift. Which compels a second double standard in me, which is that I want people to whom I intend to give something to first give me a list so when I venture out to do what I must do, I'm efficiently buying not ponderously shopping! This however reduces gift giving to glorified errand running and depletes for my gift recipients most of the fun of receiving – anticipation. *'Thanks for thinking of me'* is obliged to become *'thanks for picking this up for me!'*

Yes, efficiency is in view for me, but so too a desire not to disappoint. Yet contending with disappointment is something we must learn to do. We guard against that by restraining our hopes – keeping anticipation in check. Our gospel story today has John the Baptist (perhaps) doing that very thing – seeking to find out if his expectations got a little inflated – throwing up a hedge of protection around his heart lest it flower into disappointment in Jesus.

Jewish expectations for their Messiah were enormous and largely based on Isaiah 61:2 which said he would *“proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (on Israel) and the day of vengeance of our God (on the nations).* John, the “preparer of the way of the Lord” wrapped that *“day of vengeance of our God”* part in fiery words – “brood of vipers/burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” sort of thing. By not sparing even King Herod from those kinds of words he was imprisoned. *“Put not your trust in princes”* Psalm 146 says which was all well and good – John had not. But he had trusted in Jesus to do the *“proclaim the year of the Lord's favor”* part of Isaiah's prophesy - which included a promise to *“proclaim release for the captives.”*

That's what they'd asked for – and I get why someone would wonder why God hadn't given them what they'd asked for! Gifts - especially the Christmas sort that sit under a tree for days are not so much wrapped in glossy paper as mystery and expectation. *“What's in there...what did they get me...what enhancement in my life will I clutch upon opening.”* And that's true even if you'd disseminated a gift list and checked it twice on your “Draw Names.com” website! That's what Israel had done. When Messiah came, they knew thanks to Isaiah EXACTLY what they were getting - until he came and they didn't, at least not completely

Such is the nature of gifts – even godly ones. Greg Easterbrook penned a Christmas Eve essay in the New York Times a number of years ago in which he said *“an unopened gift might be*

anything...while the present is unopen, it can rest under the tree to be regarded and speculated upon at length, becoming whatever the recipient wishes. Opening the present, by comparison, is often anti-climactic, no matter the contents; for once opened the gift passes from the enchanted realm of promise into the constrained reality of material possessions."

John is praised as being among the greatest of God's servants, for, like Mary, the mother of our Lord, John was called upon to do something no other human person was – announce that God's answer to years of longing and a thousand prophetic promises had come. Our Lord's answer to John included a generous quote from Isaiah chapter 35 which spoke of a day when *"the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped."* That which is not right with the world will be righted in other words.

We all want that – and we can be excused if again, as this Christmas approaches, our eyes and ears tell us all is still not right. We'd be excused if, as a hedge of protection around our own hearts, we started living with lower expectations. I hope we don't do that. I hope, and I admit I hope against a lot of evidence to the contrary, that God is still gifting the world with his presence - it simply transferred to us. John is called in our lesson the greatest of those born among this human race. Yet Jesus says the likes of you and I meet and even exceed him because we live by faith in what our eyes have not seen nor ears heard and in hope of forgiveness of the sins we see and hear in ourselves.

The grace of God as a promise proclaimed can be compared to a gift under the tree, full of possibility. But like gifts that are received and then opened, it enters the constrained and strained realities of daily existence and begins to impose terms on us. Like instruction and maintenance manuals that accompany Christmas gifts God's grace calls for a response. Our lesson from Matthew hints at what grace imposes upon us more than anything – the need to wait, and the strength to be patient.

Shortly after John the Baptist was born, his cousin Jesus came into this world. Angels pronounced peace on earth and good will among all. Shepherds believed it, kings came to pay homage to it, but 30 years later, sitting in a prison cell, John discovered it hadn't worked out as promised. Since then humanity has seen lots of enhancements, but no transformation of the sort Isaiah envisioned – not even close. So what's up with this gift of God we call Jesus? Perhaps as gift giver God knows the real essence of a gift is anticipation. It is what we do not have that we often desire most. Peace, mercy, forgiveness and justice are possible – Jesus showed us that. All things are possible in Jesus – and in those who know him.

Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see. If the essence of a gift is its anticipation, then the essence of the gift of faith is the anticipation that we will one day see what now we can only believe. Those who are not offended because they were expecting something else will know God's blessing. AMEN