Are YOU the one who’s Coming?

Advent 3 T Matthew 11:2-11

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Reality often falls short of expectations. That happens a lot, doesn’t it? When we expect something or some event to be great, but it turns out to be a sort of a let down! For instance, I fool myself every year into thinking that chopping down a Christmas tree and setting it up in the tree stand and placing all the ornaments, is going to be a breeze each year. But ***hours*** later after doing some branch maintenance, tilting the tree the right way, locking the tree stand in place – it finally starts to come together. That is, until the dog decides to ruin the party! But that just shows how reality didn’t meet my idealistic expectation.

On that original Christmas night, I’m sure the announcement of the birth of a new king surprised the shepherds and wisemen. Especially when they found that the “royal” family didn’t seem so royal. Instead, they were ordinary people in less than ordinary circumstances – they were in a stable and the newborn King lying in a manger. I’m sure that scene was a bit of a dose of reality that contrasted a bit with their expectations!

John the Baptist leads the way in the season of Advent. Because He prepares the hearts of God’s faithful. He was the forerunner who prepared the way of the Lord, so that the people of God would welcome Him. He was the prophet foretold, the voice of the one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.” He was the messenger to bring this message of preparation! He knew He was God’s messenger. He prepared people for the coming kingdom. He preached “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”.

However, fast forward a bit of time for John the Baptist after the kingdom had come with the presence of Jesus, John’s reality of this kingdom he prepared for fell short of his expectation. Perhaps, John was expecting to be victorious over His enemies. Yet it seemed for a moment His enemies were victorious over him. He was in prison – all because He preached the Law to King Herod about his adulterous ways. Instead of repenting, Herod threw John in jail. As Jesus brought the Kingdom of God that John prepared folks for, John was still left in prison. I’m sure John’s expectations for living in the Kingdom were different than the reality of his imprisonment.

It probably confused John. John knew God was righteous. Holy. That God hated sin. That God would sweep away all evildoers and bring justice. That was the kingdom of heaven – that’s what John the Baptist had been preparing in people his whole ministry! Fire and brimstone preaching! That the people of God needed to prepare for the coming kingdom by repenting of their sins and being restored to God and each other.

But as John sat in prison, doubts began to form. Was he wrong? Was he wrong about God? Wrong about what His kingdom looked like? Or, is Jesus not the Messiah? Was He supposed to prepare the way for another? He asks some of his followers to ask Jesus this question: **“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”**

John’s doubts often look like our doubts. John’s shattered expectations are often relatable to our shattered expectations of what the coming King and His Kingdom look like. We often hear people, even some preachers, say that if unbelievers become Christians, then life will be great in a worldly sense. Surely, it would be better in some ways – spiritually fulfilling, clean conscience, and you’re made whole once again through God’s forgiveness. But it’s often said that your best life would be now. That by living in the kingdom of God now with a strong faith, our sicknesses would be less severe, and more manageable. Or, that we wouldn’t ever feel lonely or unloved. Or, that the good things in our lives would overshadow the bad things. And if we don’t have those things, our faith isn’t strong enough. But as we all know, the reality of living in the kingdom doesn’t promise these things. We know that real healing – both eternal and temporal - is given despite the suffering we encounter. But that often shatters the expectations we’re often duped into believing.

With this understanding about the coming King, the doubts creep in, just as it did for John. Our realities fall short of expectation – perhaps questioning if God even knows how to best reign in His kingdom. And our hearts hardly voice it, but are perhaps led to wonder – “ARE YOU the one to come? Or should we look for another? Should we look for another Savior? Perhaps one that fits my expectations a bit more…” Almost treating the whole host of religions as a vending machine – just choose what one fits your appetite.

Suffering tempts us to ask these questions. Because we see suffering as something bad for us, when God sometimes uses evil – but not causes evil – but uses evil and suffering for our benefit. And our moments of suffering are only magnified when our enemies rejoice at their prosperity, while we suffer – like John in his imprisonment while King Herod continued on in frivolous living. Perhaps we feel like John sometimes – we feel a bit of shame and embarrassment when the kingdom of God didn’t meet our expectations. With the devil working within the leaders in some churches, tempting them to do horrid things, it’s often hard to feel some sense of doubt – I often hear stories of people saying – “The Holy Spirit can’t exist because of what some foolishness some Christians engage in.” Then Satan tempts us to flee and find something else that will meet our expectations – whether they be reasonable or not.

So, John’s disciples go to ask Jesus the question – Are you the one? Jesus’ response shows what we can expect from Him as King – **“the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”** Jesus’ actions showed He did not come to fill our perhaps selfish expectations. Rather, He came to give us what we need. He came to give life. He came to bring His Kingdom that’s marked by love, healing, blessing, and good news.

Certainly, His kingdom is on full display at the cross. By His willingness to suffer and die, it tells us a lot about the kingdom He brings and what this means for us who live in the kingdom. By looking to Him, our expectations for the kingdom are made clear. The cross shows us that our coming King doesn’t bring life free from trial, suffering, or temptation. He Himself brought the kingdom to earth and still went through suffering and death. Through His willingness to suffer the punishment of mankind’s sin, He showed His love for us. We can expect that in the Kingdom – God’s relentless love. His love may not always come meet our expectations. Because Our human nature desires love absent from suffering, life absent of death, a King who affirms us instead of a King who changes us.

Because of the cross, we can also expect God’s presence. We can expect that we won’t be alone in our trials. That because of Christ’s forgiveness, our sin that separated us from God will not be a barrier to Him dwelling with us. And He will form, shape, and teach us what it means to dwell with Him and live in His kingdom. And part of living in such a kingdom is this promise of Jesus: **“Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”**

That’s just another way to say what Jesus said at the end of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. He said, **“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** Part of the expectations in the kingdom is enduring persecutions – whether its to our livelihood, social status, or people just mock and laugh at Christian beliefs, calling them outdated and ancient. It’s a promised mark of the kingdom. It’s a promised mark to the messengers of kingdom – one of which is John the Baptist who is in prison. Another of which was Jesus, who was crucified. Others include the apostle’s who died on account of their faith and message proclamation. Others beyond that include the persecuted Christian Church by the Romans up until the fourth century. This also includes you – messengers of the Gospel who are not offended by the message of Jesus. Who encounter little persecutions falsely and unjustly on account of Christ’s name which you bear.

This is what we can expect of the kingdom: not only having our hearts prepared by God through His messengers, like Christian pastors and friends. But also, being messengers to prepare the hearts of the world by sharing how deprave humanity’s spiritual condition truly is, and how Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. Not being ashamed by Jesus’ teachings, nor the teachings from the Word of God. This doesn’t mean a life free from suffering, but it does come with the promise of Christ’s blood covering your iniquities, and a certain joy and rejoicing during suffering. All because the one who is to come back to redeem you, and the one who reigns with and through you now, is with you this day and always.

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