

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Advent 3A, Dec 11, 2016  
Matthew 11:2-11**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What did you expect your life would be? What were your childhood or young adulthood dreams? Have they come to pass or do you live with longing or regret? In our book study discussion last week of Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World*, we talked a bit about unfulfilled dreams in the context of vocation. Some didn't get the education they always wanted; others haven't ended up with the family they expected; some career goals have gone unfulfilled and others are consciously using a kind of second chance to be more present and engaged with their families. Some people have a plan early on in their lives and manage to live it to the fullest. Others find themselves with lives they never expected or the life they planned and dreamed about didn't bring the fulfillment or happiness they anticipated. Anticipation... Expectation... Hope... these are the primary themes of the Advent season that are exemplified in our Gospel story today.

On this third Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist once again steps onto the stage in our Gospel drama, if only for a moment. In Matthew's Gospel, we first encounter John in chapter 3, when he suddenly appears in the wilderness proclaiming: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He is something of a wild man, seemingly unafraid to confront leaders in the community as he prepares the way for, in his words: "one who is more powerful than I [who] is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (3:11-12) It is a grand and powerful vision of what John expects is about to happen, and it inspires many. Its fulfillment starts off well as Jesus comes to be baptized and at the event the heavens open and a divine voice declares him God's own Son. The kingdom of God is, indeed, at hand. Great and wonderful things are about to happen!

Then in chapter 4, Jesus hears that John has been arrested and withdraws to Galilee. There he takes up the mantle and proclaims the very same message we heard from John: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus calls disciples and begins preaching about this kingdom of heaven where the poor, the meek and the hungry are blessed. Jesus says he has come not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. Jesus strengthens and expands God's teaching with the refrain, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." He extolls the crowds to "love your enemies" and trust in God's provision in ever greater and deeper ways. Jesus heals Jew and Gentile alike; dines with tax collectors and sinners; restores sight to the blind; and empowers his disciples to do the same.

All this news gets back to John in prison... and doubt begins to creep in. Jesus isn't doing what John expected. John anticipated a powerful leader who would pronounce fiery judgement on the ills of the world, a "winnowing fork in his hand." But the 'deeds of Christ' that Jesus has been busy doing in the past few chapters are acts of compassion, not the expected fiery

judgement, and so “John backs off from his previous confidence.” (NIB, 266) Maybe John got it wrong and Jesus isn’t the one we’ve been waiting for? Rather than the dawn of faith, today we hear about the beginning of doubt and a confusion among Jesus’ followers that continues throughout the rest of the story and arguably into our present lives. Jesus does not live up to our expectations and we wonder what it all means. What are we to expect when God comes into our world?

In the face of his doubt, John doesn’t shrink back into himself or disappear into an imaginary story of his own creation. John recognizes that what he hears is actually happening on the ground doesn’t fit with what he expected. And rather than clinging to his expectation and either walking away, or dismissing Jesus as a fraud, or doing mental gymnastics to make what is reported fit with what he initially proclaimed, John chooses curiosity instead. John chooses to lean in, to ask a question, to engage with Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus’ response to John’s disciples likewise keeps them in the here and now: “Go and tell John what you hear and see...” and then Jesus recites a list of his compassionate deeds echoing words of prophecy from days gone by, like what we heard from Isaiah 35 today: “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped... the lame shall leap like a deer...” and so on. John might have expected a fiery judgement... and we can understand why he might have hoped for it... but the work Jesus undertook was fulfillment of different promise and prophecy. If John had held too tightly to his expectations, he might have missed the coming of the kingdom of heaven about which we preached.

Holding too tightly to our expectations and our predictions of how things are going to be has a way of damaging our spirit. The Stockdale Paradox is a term coined by Jim Collins that describes how our expectations can actually kill us. It is named after Admiral Jim Stockdale, the highest ranking US military officer imprisoned in Vietnam, who was held in the “Hanoi Hilton” and tortured repeatedly over 8 years. When Collins asked Stockdale to describe how he had survived so many years as a POW while so many died, he replied: “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.” Collins pressed further: “Who didn’t make it out?” “Oh, that’s easy,” Stockdale replied, “The optimists... They were the ones who said ‘we’re going to be out by Christmas’. And, Christmas would come and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. Then they died of a broken heart.” The lesson Stockdale described and Collins named as the Stockdale Paradox is about never confusing “faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose - with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” (*Good to Great*, 85) The Stockdale Paradox is about holding expectation lightly, not clinging to ‘how things are going to be,’ and living courageously in the present moment, so that hope, and life, can triumph.

After answering John’s question through his disciples, Jesus goes on to address the crowds’ expectations of John: “What did you go out in the wilderness to look at? What did you go out to see?” Perhaps the crowd had also noticed that John’s description of what was about to happen, what Jesus would do, had not come to pass. Perhaps the crowd too had begun to doubt,

and in their doubt, question John's role and authority as a prophet. And so Jesus lays to rest any question about John, describing him as "more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" Perhaps then, as is common now, the crowd misunderstood prophecy as fortune-telling, rather than its true nature as radically paying attention, and courageously telling the truth, about the present.

As a prophet, John didn't know the future any more than anyone else. What he did see and know, however, was the need for repentance... for letting go of the presumption of special status before God based on ancestry. John saw the need to pay attention to where good fruit is already growing and called people to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." This is the message Jesus reinforces as he answers the query of John's disciples: "Go and tell John what you hear and see..." Don't get distracted or discouraged by your expectations. Don't hold too tightly to the future you imagined, or how you thought it was going to be. Pay attention instead to what is going on in the here and now. What do you hear and see Jesus doing? Let go of how you think it should be, so that you can be ready to receive the gift and grace of the kingdom of heaven come near. Hold your expectations lightly, and live courageously in the present, so that hope, and life, can triumph.

If ever there was a time of year when our expectations can kill us, it is now. The expectations we heap on Christmastime can actually steal away our ability to live in the joy of the season. The paradox of the Advent season is that we are called to prepare for God's coming in our world while holding lightly to what we think it means. We must strive to prepare while recognizing that God's intrusion into our lives and into the world is always going to come as a surprise and defy our expectations.

And so may we let go of whatever we expected our lives to be, and whatever we expect our lives will be, so that we can see and hear whatever God is doing in the lives we have today. May we hear and see Jesus in every act of kindness, in every moment of generosity, in every deed of compassion, and recognize the kingdom of heaven come near. May we live courageously in the present, holding our expectations lightly, so that hope and life can triumph.