

Theme: What to expect from Jesus.

**Text: Matthew 11:2-11**

<sup>2</sup> When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples <sup>3</sup> to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. <sup>6</sup> Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

<sup>7</sup> As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? <sup>8</sup> If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. <sup>9</sup> Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written:

‘I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

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God’s Word we’ll consider today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 11. Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, when darkness veils your lovely face, let me rest in your unchanging grace. Amen.*

What’s the best, most unexpected gift you’ve ever received? I remember my mom buying me a big pack of police toys that I had been eying when I was maybe 7 or 8... I never thought she’d get them, but when I went snooping for presents in her room I found them. It was totally unexpected and I was so excited!

It’s a lot of fun to get an unexpected gift... maybe you can relate... but what about when the unexpected gift is not the good kind of unexpected...? Has that ever happened? Well... if it has, you’re not the only one. In fact if you want a good laugh you can go online (after church!) and look up stories about terrible Christmas gifts that might make you feel better about the bad gifts you’ve gotten (or given) over the years. Let me share just one of these stories for now though that I came across where a girl wrote:

*“One Christmas I got 18 pairs of socks. I was probably 12 and I tried really hard to look grateful and thank my parents, but with each pair I opened I got progressively more upset. It didn’t help that my brother was tearing through his toys and video games. I ended up excusing myself to go to the bathroom and started crying. My mom came to get me and said to stop crying and come back to the living room. She then gave me my real gift - - a laptop. The reason I got socks was my mom just wanted me to have something to unwrap because my brother had a lot of cheaper stuff, where I had one bigger thing. I felt incredible spoiled and embarrassed. Definitely a happy ending!”*

You gotta wonder if John the Baptist felt like this girl who kept opening unexpectedly bad gifts. For some time now his life was turning into an unending parade of unexpected gifts, and not the good kind.

And it was quite the abrupt reversal after what was a pretty amazing start to John's life and his prophetic work. We heard a bit about John last week here at church. If you don't remember John was the child born to the childless Zachariah and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel had told his father that they would have this child named John and that he would be the greatest prophet of God who ever lived. His work would be to prepare people and to point people to the promised Savior who would come into the world in John's lifetime.

Matter of fact, that Savior ended up being born just about six months after he was, and there was actually a family connection between them too. But it wasn't until John began his public ministry in the wilderness of Judea that things really picked up. Remember what we heard in our Gospel reading last week? **People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**

John was a powerful and popular preacher. Which at first glance might seem strange since we know he lived a pretty rugged life, wearing leather and camel's hair clothing, eating desert foods like locust and wild honey, and preaching a message that was not always easy to hear. Remember, John's primary mission from God was to prepare people for the coming Savior. And if people are going to be ready to trust a Savior from sin, they need to understand that they are in fact sinners. And John very clearly proclaimed the law of God and made sure people understood they were sinful and needed the forgiveness and cleansing that only God could give.

But not everyone liked his message. Sure it seemed to resonate with the common people, even the soldiers, and tax collectors, who all found John's message compelling and repented of their sin and turned in faith to the Savior John proclaimed. But there were others who pushed back. The religious leaders of the day didn't care for John calling out their spiritual hypocrisy. And then there was a man named Herod. He was one of the sons of Herod the Great, the king who tried to have Jesus killed as an infant in Bethlehem... and like his father, this new King Herod found himself on the wrong side of God's law. Matthew tells us this in his Gospel: **Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.**

Herod stole his brother's wife... John the Baptist called him out for his adultery... and what did he get for doing the right thing? A dungeon jail cell... and an unexpected end to his popular public ministry as a prophet... You can probably imagine some of the thoughts that might have gone through his mind.

They say when you're in jail you have a lot of time to think... and John surely found himself wondering, "What happened!?" It hadn't been that long ago that John had baptized the Christ. That he has seen the Holy Spirit visibly descend on Jesus... and had heard the Father's voice from heaven say: **This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.** It wasn't that long ago that John had told his own disciples that this Jesus was **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

And when Jesus' public ministry got underway John was full of joy not jealousy, even telling his own disciples that Jesus growing in popularity while he faded into the background was a good thing... as he put it: **He must become greater, I must become less.**

But I don't know if jail was what John had in mind when he said that. And remember too that John had spoken about the judgment and vengeance that the Messiah would enact on the enemies of God. He knew the prophecies like the one we heard today from Isaiah which said: **Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.**

But John was sitting in jail... and Jesus was not coming to save him from prison... in fact Jesus was busy out in the world with his own ministry and John seemed to have been forgotten. This was not what

John had been expecting. And John was filled with disappointment and doubts began to creep into his heart.

Can you relate? Maybe for you it was the hope of good friends, and good grades in a new school year... but half way through the year and the grades are not what you were hoping for and maybe you feel alone or unsure of where you stand with your friends or classmates... it's not what you had hoped for... not what you expected. Maybe for some of you it's work that once seemed to hold so much promise when you first started, but now work has become frustrating and unsatisfying.

Perhaps you find yourself in a marriage that began with such joy and promise but now seems hopelessly broken. You don't want to divorce, but you don't see a happy ending like you did on your wedding day.

For others it's financial reversals that maybe have left you reeling... or a doctor's diagnosis... or the sting of death that leaves you wondering "what happened!?"

Yes, we know how John feels don't we? We know what it is to have our hopes dashed... to have things fail to meet our expectations... And we know, like John, what it is to doubt whether or not Jesus really remembers me... or if he can do anything at all to make a difference in my life.

And when we grow weary in waiting in our own prison cells of fear or loneliness or sadness what are we to do? Well... as bad a place as John was in, he gives us some pretty good guidance yet, doesn't he. When he was at his lowest... when doubts and fears filled his heart... he reached out to Jesus.

Of course, John couldn't speak to him directly since he was in prison, but he got a message to his own disciples who went to ask Jesus the question weighing on John's heart. And listen closely to this question... because really it is the same question we ask Jesus when things are not going as we expected or hoped for in this life. John asked: **"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

When our life seems to be falling apart... or at least when our hopes and dreams come crashing down... we are tempted to wonder, "What are you doing Jesus?" "If you really are my Savior, why don't you save me from my loneliness... from my cancer... from my battles with addiction... from money problems and people problems and all these problems of life that seem to chip away at my joy?" "Are you really the one who can fix all this stuff? Or should I expect someone else... should I be looking for some other Savior?"

And how does Jesus respond to such questions... even if they are only the unspoken aches of our hearts? Well, take a look again at how he responded to John. **Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."**

What a Savior John had! You notice he doesn't tell him, "Quit your whining, John, your suffering won't last forever!" Or, "C'mon, John, suck it up, you think you're the only prophet who's ever had to suffer injustice?" No, none of that. Instead, he reminds John of what he already knew... he reminds John of what God's Word had promised about the Savior.

Those words Jesus spoke were words that fulfilled the promises God made about the Savior through the prophet Isaiah. In essence Jesus told John, "If you are having doubts about me being the Savior because of the current circumstances of your life, just remember what God promised I would do... And, oh, by the way, I'm doing it all! I'm working miracles, I'm raising the dead, and I'm preaching the gospel. Your faith in me is not misplaced. And just because I haven't pulled you out of prison doesn't mean I don't love you or that I've forgotten you or that I've failed to keep any of my promises to you. Just wait a little while longer... you'll see... a new day is coming."

And that's the same message our Jesus gives us when life hits us hard and the things we receive from God feel unexpected and even painful. He points us to the Word. He reminds us that he does have the power to fix our problems, to calm the storms of life raging around us... but he also reminds us that at times he'll instead calm the storm in our hearts and give us peace in his promises even when peace in this world is elusive.

Because remember, while Jesus encouraged John here and spoke highly of him, things didn't get better for John in this life. Just the opposite. He'd soon find his head on a plate as a sick party favor... an inglorious end to what had looked like a life filled with promise. But of course, we then remember that's the thing about God's promises... they are better than the promises we might come up with. When John died in a dungeon his soul was released not just from the captivity of prison, but from the captivity of this sinful and dying world. And that's because John trusted in Jesus... who was, as he predicted, **the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.**

John of course never lived to see the day that happened, but by faith he trusted it would. And God, as always, did not disappoint. Jesus would face an end more terrible than John's... but in the death and punishment Jesus faced, we see God doing what he does best... he brought blessings beyond our wildest dreams out of suffering and injustice and death. Jesus' death meant our life... our sins forgiven... it meant that God's judgment and retribution would not fall on anyone who looks to Christ in faith... And like John's death, and our own death someday... Jesus' death was not the end of the story, and because he lives, that's why we also will live.

My friends, when life hits you with the unexpected... when the gifts of God don't seem like gifts at all... when they seem worse than 18 pairs of socks... remember... God has something much better than a laptop waiting for you. And knowing that heaven waits... that the day is coming... well, that gives us joy in the face of suffering... and unshakeable confidence in our God... our God who works in all things for the good of those who love him... in all things! Not just the good things, but the bad things too.

The problems at home and work and school... the problems with friends and family and finances... health issues, even end of life issues... all of it God uses to drive you back to him in his Word and back to him in prayer. And there, close to him than ever before, you find him answering your cries with the most amazing blessings, some of which we see in this life, and many more which are waiting in the life to come. God grant you patience while you wait my friends, and joyful hearts that look to Jesus expectantly when life hits you with the unexpected. As our Savior said: **Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.** Amen.

**The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**