

## Third Sunday of Advent – 2007

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
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### **Matthew 11:2-11**

When John, in prison, heard what the Messiah had been doing, he sent a message to him through his disciples: “Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?” Jesus gave them this answer: “Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind are regaining their sight, and the lame are walking; lepers are being cleansed, and the deaf are hearing, and the dead are being raised, and the poor are receiving good news. How fortunate is the one who doesn’t stumble because of me!”

When they left, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed swaying in the wind? But what did you go out to see? A person wearing delicate clothing? Ah! People who wear delicate clothing are in royal houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say. Actually, someone much more than a prophet. This is the one about whom the Scriptures say, *See, I am sending my messenger before you come, who will prepare the way ahead of you.* I tell you the truth, among those born of women, no one has arisen who is greater than John the Baptist. Yet the least person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.”

### **Sermon**

Special days can be disappointing. You plan, you prepare, you daydream until, at last, the day arrives. Your high school graduation. Your 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Your 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Thanksgiving Day. Christmas Day. At last, the day arrives! Then, a day or two later, everything is back to normal. The special day was great while it lasted. But reality soon comes rushing back. It always does.

Jesus can be disappointing in much the same way. (Is that a terrible thing to say? Jesus, disappointing?) Christmas and Easter are the big, annual “Jesus-days” in our calendar. We don’t expect those days to change the world. They’re just recollections of long-ago events. But we do expect those long-ago events to have changed the world. And it’s not clear that they have.

Peter faced that criticism. “Ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). In other words, “Nothing has changed!” Peter’s answer to that criticism? Pious evasion, some fancy footwork about a thousand years being like a day. And by now it’s been 2000 years, or close to it.

The fact is, Jesus can be disappointing. Especially if you have big expectations.

**John the Baptist was disappointed in Jesus.** Out of that disappointment, he asked a question: “Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?” Because we know how the story turns out, that question surprises us. Of course, Jesus is the one. Maybe John was surprised by the question, too. But he had to ask it. His circumstances forced the question out of him. “Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?”

John was in prison. That’s where powerful people put truth-telling prophets. And Herod was just such a powerful person. And he didn’t like the cutting edge of John’s truth. John was in prison. And time was running out. So he asked his question, “Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?”

You see, John had certain expectations of Jesus, Jesus the Messiah. The Messiah, John expected — the Messiah would put things right, big things. The Messiah would put Rome in its place, marginalized like every other once-dominant empire. And the Herods of this world? (Herod was just one of the many local contractors to whom the Romans outsourced the tasks of civilization and tyranny.) The Herods of

this world would be taken care of. And the Messiah would put Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple of the Lord in their proper place as well. The Temple Mount would be exalted above all other mountains. All people would stream to Jerusalem. And Israel herself would be revealed, for all to see, as the chosen nation.

What John's expectations amounted to, at least, was the end of Israel's exile, at last. In a certain sense, Israel's exile had been short-lived and was long over. Centuries ago the people had returned from Babylon. A Temple, of sorts, had been rebuilt. And lately the Herod family had been fancying up the Temple. But the people and the land and the Temple, too, were but dim reflections of past glory. And speaking of glory, the glory of the Lord had never returned to the Temple. And there was no king in Israel, only a long succession of empires and emperors, emperors who thought they were god. The Messiah would put all this right. It was the core of the Messiah's job description.

John had been sure about Jesus, that he was the Messiah. But things weren't going so well, not for Israel and certainly not for John himself. It looked like he might not live to see the Messiah's triumph, not at the rate Jesus was going anyway. So John asks his question: "Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?" It's a question born of disappointment, disappointment with Jesus.

**Jesus responds to John with a straightforward answer: "Go and tell John what you hear and see."** The world was changing. For the blind and the lame, for lepers and the deaf and the dead and the poor, the world was changing. And this meant one thing: Israel's exile was coming to an end, Israel's God was coming back to his people, the time had arrived for all things to be put right.

But John knew all this. He had heard what the Messiah had been doing. Word gets around, even in prison. And John knew what it all pointed to. Isaiah the prophet had connected all these signs to one thing: Israel's return from exile and God's return to Israel. John knew all this, John heard all this, John saw all this. But he still asked his question: "Are you the one who is coming, or are we waiting for someone else?" He still asked his question. Why?

**Why? Because Jesus was only doing some of what John expected. Jesus was only doing some of what Isaiah had announced.** Where was the wrath? Where was the divine vengeance against the enemies of Israel? Jesus hadn't even confronted Herod, never mind Pilate, never mind Caesar. John had expected Jesus to unleash a baptism of fire. If he were the Messiah. Where was the fire? Where was the fire? So John asks, "Are we waiting for someone else?"

For someone else? No. It's just that John's expectations, which were the typical expectations of his time and place — John's expectations needed to be recalibrated. "Let your expectations be shaped by me," Jesus was saying. "How fortunate is the one who doesn't stumble because of me, because of how this all will be done by me, because of who I will turn out to be."

Oh, the fire would burn. Vengeance would be unleashed. Wrath would be poured out. And the Messiah would suffer it all. The blood he would shed would be his own. The destruction would be his to endure. The death would be his to die. The exile would end. God would return to Jerusalem — to die outside its walls. Meanwhile John would die in prison, never hearing about the Messiah's doom, never hearing about the Messiah's deliverance. John would die in prison, wondering until the end — I think that's one import of Jesus' statement that the least person in kingdom is greater than John — John would die in prison, wondering until the end if he should have waited for someone else.

**John died disappointed. And for centuries Christians have lived and died the same way, disappointed, disappointed with Jesus.** We know the story. We know we get a helpless infant not a warrior. We know Jesus will go to his death looking like a failure. We know his resurrection and ascension will declare him a winner. We know Jesus will come back to finish what he started. We know Jesus will come back. We're counting on Jesus coming back, because the first time he came things didn't end up so well.

It's not that he was crucified. We understand (so we think) why that was necessary. It's just that, after sin and death and hell were defeated by Jesus' death and resurrection, they nevertheless have remained dominant. The empire that crossed-out Jesus held onto power for centuries. And one evil empire after another has risen in its place. Sin continues to hold too much power in our neighborhoods. And death continues to shadow our lives.

Jesus' victory, such as it was, that first time around seems hidden, obviously incomplete, disappointing. The new creation of peace and of fellowship with God, the kingdom of justice and jubilation — it all remains a far-off vision. The vision pulls us forward, but we barely see it. It's not here. Not yet. That's why we expect something more the next time, the second time Jesus comes. Next time, judging by Christian literature and songs, we expect things to be much different.

We expect Jesus to come back not as a helpless baby, but as a warrior. We expect Jesus to come this time with such power that everything will be settled in a flash. We expect Jesus to be the second time around what he wasn't the first time. We expect the Lion of the tribe of Judah, with razor-like claws bloodied from battle, destroying all the enemies of God. We expect a violent upheaval that turns the world upside down, overcoming all resistance to God. We expect fire finally to be unleashed. We expect the world to be burned clean. And we expect to escape from that calamity ourselves only narrowly and, of course, only by the mercy of God.

But what if these expectations aren't realized? What if Jesus returns looking, not like the lion of the tribe of Judah, but like a lamb that has been slain? What if he bears in his hands, in his feet, in his side the wounds of slaughter? What if he breathes out not fire, but forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace? Will we be disappointed? What will we say? "Are you the one? We were waiting for someone else."

Our expectations need to be calibrated, not according to our first-time-around and subsequent disappointment, but according to who Jesus is, according to who Jesus has shown himself to be. "How fortunate," Jesus says, "is the one who doesn't stumble because of me."