

12-6-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 11. 1-14 Stumbling Expectations

We all bring expectations to life, don't we? I had wonderful teachers from kindergarten through 3rd grade. I loved school and those teachers were a big reason I did. I started 4th grade expecting to love it too, and I would have, except for the teacher...Mrs. Simmons. Let's just say she was the only teacher who ever kicked me out of class to go sit out in the hallway. Or the job we expected to be a perfect fit, but ended up being more of that phrase we hate at the end of a job description- "and other duties as assigned." Marriage comes with expectations too that often rotate around the idea that our spouse is going to make us happy. Then reality sinks in that a happy marriage is the work of both people. Marriage has some "other duties as assigned" we didn't expect too. When something important doesn't live up to our expectations, what do we do?

In today's scripture reading, John the Baptist was wondering what to do because Jesus wasn't living up to his expectations for the Messiah. John had preached about the Messiah to come, shouted for people to "Repent and be baptized." He said the Messiah would soon put the ax to worthless trees- people who didn't get on board. John deprived himself of even the basic pleasures of life- wearing clothes even Value Village would never accept, eating locusts and honey instead of meals with friends and family. John lived the life of a monk totally dedicated to calling people to turn from sin and prepare for the Messiah. And now he sat in prison.

What was Jesus doing while John was in prison? Rather than preach loud fiery sermons about judgment, Jesus taught about the love of God and about us loving God and loving our neighbor. He did not take up John's ascetic lifestyle; Jesus enjoyed sumptuous dinner parties with wine. He didn't gather an army to declare himself King; he taught nonviolence and praying for enemies rather than conquering them. Perhaps worst of all, Jesus didn't seem to appreciate the stiff righteous types; he hung around the people others called sinners- tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, and the broken. He defiled himself by touching the unclean to heal them and raise them from the dead. No, Jesus did not meet John's expectations of a righteous Messiah at all.

“Jesus, are you the One who is to come, or should we expect another?” You might be wondering why didn’t Jesus just answer, “Yes, I am.” Instead, he invited John to consider what Jesus was up to- how the lame and the blind and the deaf were healed, the dead are raised and the gospel is preached to the poor. He called John to remember what the prophets had said the Messiah would do, if John had eyes to see and ears to hear. So often, Jesus addresses the expectations that lurk underneath the question people think they’re asking. *What were you expecting, John?*

That is an important question for us to ponder in the weeks before Christmas. Underneath what we say, *what are we looking for?* Jesus asked the crowd that question three times in today’s scripture.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No?

Then what **did** you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? No?

Then when did you **go out** to see? A prophet?

Jesus’ question for the crowd is for us today too: What are **we** looking for this Advent as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s coming?

At Christmas, so much of what we bring to the manger are not hopes for gifts that can be wrapped in paper and ribbon. How many of us can’t really give an answer when someone asks what to give us for Christmas because we don’t really want or need more stuff? But we do bring hopes. Some hopes we bring to the manger are big- like world peace- real peace, the peace the angels told the shepherds about the night Jesus was born, peace for all people everywhere. Peace in our nation after a bitter election, peace among people of different races, the end of fighting within our own families. Or that every person would know the peace of having enough food, an affordable place to live, jobs, health insurance, and safe schools for the kids. Peace within churches that are fighting over whether to re-open during this pandemic.

Other things we hope for are less global but just as important- the courage to pursue a new dream, a way to bring up something that’s hard to talk about, peace while grieving the death of someone important, finding new meaning after our life has changed

dramatically, hearing and speaking words of forgiveness and reconciliation after years of hurt, healing, the strength to care for someone with dementia. The list of hopes brought to the manger is huge.

Jesus answered John's question by describing a world where "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." A world where everyone has what they need the most- the presence of God among us overturning what's wrong, mending what's broken, bringing healing and good news that isn't fake or just for the privileged few. Isn't that what John had waited his whole life to see? But his expectations caused him to stumble, to not see that what he had waited for was right before him if he had eyes to see God's new way of bringing it to pass that was different from what he expected.

What are we looking for this Advent and Christmas? What are we expecting? A return to a time in the past we enjoyed and made sense to us? Christmas during this pandemic will be different for sure- the big family gatherings we have loved over the years are unwise and risky, especially for grandma and grandpa. Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear new things God has for us, that if we look closer, will provide what we long for in a different way than we may want or expect? No one expected the Messiah to be conceived in a young unwed woman, much less be found sleeping in a feeding trough or visited by shepherds and kingly wise men from the East. No one expected heaven's angels to sing of his birth. And yet, that's how Jesus came. What are we missing, what ways of Emmanuel- God-with-us- are we not seeing or hearing because we're stumbling over our expectations?

And what about the rest of life outside Christmas? What are we looking for to be happy? I listened to a sermon yesterday from 1 Corinthians 13: 13. We love this love chapter of the Bible- love is patient, love is kind... But this sermon was about the last verse that is also familiar: ³ *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* Faith, hope, and love remain, they last, they endure when all else ends. So much of what we count as essential for happiness in this life are things that are temporary, they aren't

designed to remain. Our bodies- they're temporary, in fact, the body we're in today isn't the same body we had yesterday because our cells keep changing out, some dying and others just starting. Look in the mirror- these bodies are temporary. Our homes are temporary- Rob and I counted up 13 houses and apartments we have lived in since we got married almost 50 years ago. Even if you have lived in the same house for that many years, you have made changes to it along the way; it's not same house you bought. Houses are temporary. Even church buildings are temporary- this church had an early church building burn to the ground. That didn't stop the church. The building you remember the most fondly now belongs to another congregation. Even the space you rented for 7-8 years is no longer your church home. Buildings are temporary.

Friends of Community Church of Issaquah, I will soon come to the end of my time as your Interim Pastor. I have loved serving among you, but I was always only temporary. You will begin a new phase as this congregation with a Spiritual Care Pastor. He will only be temporary too. When the time comes that it will safe for you to gather in person again, you will start another new phase of your history in another temporary place. Will you stumble over expectations of returning back to the days of the past, to do the same things that really haven't worked well for awhile? Or will you let God do new things through you, things you never expected, so more people in Issaquah can hear the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that speak to a new generation? Will you let Jesus' vision of what matters most be what matters most to you this Advent ... and beyond? Paul said faith, hope, and love remain. They're not temporary. On this day we lighted the Advent candle of peace, so I add that too. Faith, hope, love, and the peace of God that passes understanding remain to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.