

EXPECTING MESSIAH

a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for Dec. 11, 2022

based on Matt. 11: 2-11

Let me begin with a Christmas memory from the early 1920s. It's told by Donald Graves:

The family finances had taken a real beating. My grandfather's business had collapsed, jobs were almost non-existent, and the country was in a near depression. The family had a tree for Christmas that year, but no presents. They simply couldn't afford them. On Christmas Eve, they all went to bed in pretty low spirits.

Unbelievably, when they woke up on Christmas morning, there was a mound of presents under the tree. They tried to control themselves at breakfast, but rushed through the meal in record time.

Then the fun began. My grandmother went first. They surrounded her in anticipation, and when she opened her package, they saw that she had been given an old shawl that she had "misplaced" several months earlier. My grandfather got an old axe with a broken handle. My aunt got her old slippers. One of the boys got a pair of patched and wrinkled trousers. My dad got a hat, the same hat he thought he had left in a restaurant back in November.

Each old cast-off came as a total surprise. Before long, they were laughing so hard that they could barely pull the strings on the next package. But where had this largesse come from? It was my uncle, Morris. For several months he had been secreting away old things that he knew no one wouldn't miss. Then, on Christmas Eve, after the rest had gone to bed, he had quietly wrapped up the presents and placed them under the tree.

My father remembered this as one of the finest Christmases they ever had.

I suppose one could divide the world into two kinds of people. Those who are wedded to their expectations and those who are open to a future that might be new, very different, and, in some ways, even better.

John the Baptist is the former type. He has an old style fire and brimstone idea of what a messiah should be and he's sticking to it.

"Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:10)

The world is coming to a swift end. There's only time to drop to your knees and repent, and John is really gleeful about it.

His favorite book of the Bible would most likely be *Proverbs*. You'd most likely find the following proverb taped to his refrigerator.

The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but God blesses the abode of the righteous.

Well, John is arrested and Jesus follows quickly on his heels. Is Jesus calling for an end of the world? Does he usher in the final judgment as John expects?

No. Nothing of the sort. Instead, he's traveling all around the region of the Galilee healing the sick, preaching good news of God's love (not punishment), going to potlucks. What's the matter with him??

So John, in jail, very depressed, clearly disillusioned, sends word to Jesus by way of his own disciples asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we supposed to wait for another, because you don't seem angry enough to be a messiah?"

Jesus responds this way: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Jesus is using a different Bible text as the cornerstone of his ministry, and it's not from *Proverbs*. His words on healing and good news are from the prophet *Isaiah*. While John would not appreciate the verses much, he would recognize them because they were well-known.

Why is John so full of spit and vinegar? Maybe it's because John's favorite book, *Proverbs*, speaks so glibly of a religion of rewards and punishments. Here's a prime example:

No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. (Prov. 12:21)

Do you buy that one? I sure don't.

Yep, and now, John finds himself in Herod's jail. It's making him crazy. What is he to think? Perhaps he wondered what he had done to land himself in prison.

I remember the first hospital call I ever made. I visited a young mother who greeted me with these words: "I've been lying here all morning wondering what terrible thing I did to put me in the hospital."

Jesus had no time for that way of thinking. Here is why we know this. Once he healed a man who was **born** blind. His disciples, knowing that the man had been born blind, asked Jesus, who sinned, this man or his parents that he should have been **born** blind?

According to the conventional wisdom of the day someone had to be at fault. Things like blindness, lameness, or planter's wart didn't just happen to people randomly. They were considered punishments. So what sin happened before he was born?

Jesus, who knew better said, "no one sins when they get sick, and no one is rewarded for being good." To prove this he took them out to the edge of town and showed them a stretch of farmers' fields and said, "Look for yourselves : 'The nourishing rain falls on the farms of the just and the unjust alike.'"

God sends the nourishing rain on the fields of the farmer who goes to worship every week, and gives 10% of his income to the temple, and God sends just as much rain to the farmer who is a known scoundrel. That's just how things work in God's economy.

Jesus knew that evidence of that is everywhere and in plain sight. But if your sense of the world is like John's you'll never ever see it.

And there's more contrast between Jesus and John mentioned in the New Testament if we doubt this:

John was once asked about ethics: how should we treat the poor? His reply is in Matthew's gospel:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.

But Jesus, knowing what John had said, goes beyond it, WAY beyond it:

You have heard what others have said] but I say to you, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Luke 6:27

John's ethic goes this way: If you happen to be lucky enough to have two coats, give one away. That's a St. Vincent de Paul kind of ethic. Right?
Very conventional.

Jesus, on the other hand, says, if someone STEALS your coat, run after him, tackle him if you have to, and say, "this is the only shirt I have, but I think it'd look great on you. Here, it's yours, buddy."

What is God like, according to Jesus? God is a god of grace beyond all expectation.

That's what the story of THE PRODIGAL SON is all about, right? The son who runs away from home and spends his father's inheritance on loose living, gets a welcome befitting a king, and his Puritanical older brother (who only knows a life that amounts to one thing – work) and who gets no special recognition at all, is left to endure his father throwing a celebration for his dissolute brothers who has the gall to come home.

This is hard for most of us who are more like John the Baptist than Jesus (which includes me and most of the rest of us, I bet). We tend to think pretty conventionally about rewards and punishments. We'd rather live in that kind of world. Christianity as Jesus understands it is difficult when you really look at it closely.

John never would have been a happy follower of Jesus. Jesus knew this. That's why he says to John: ". . . blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Remember how the story of Jesus began? It's the story of a peasant and his wife who is expecting: They traveled all the way to Bethlehem and *there was no room for them in the inn.*

There is little room in this world for people who are unconventional; for people who take seriously folk for whom religion is about more than punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous.

On his way into this world, the baby Jesus had a king trying to kill him. And they took him out of this world on a cross. That's no accident. This is simply how the world treats people who rock the boat, who go beyond the limits of reason to love people so blindly.

But isn't it wonderful when common folk like you and me find it in themselves to cut those marginal folks a break. It can make such a huge difference, and that usually escapes us when we honor them.

Here's a true story about an anonymous woman who came into the world unwanted and unwelcomed and what happened to her.

THE DAY AFTER *my high-school graduation in 1963, I left an abusive foster home and ended up in Long Beach, California, far from the small town where I'd spent my childhood. A Catholic-run thrift store hired me to gather hangers for a dollar an hour. I desperately needed a better-paying job, so I hit the pavement wearing my one good outfit and pink high heels. I took tests and filled out endless applications, but no one would take the risk of hiring a skinny teenager with no work experience.*

Then I answered an ad in the paper for a file-clerk position. The interviewer, Miss Grannis, gave me hope. She didn't say I was too young or too inexperienced. Instead she said, "Call me in a couple of days."

I called the next day, and the next, and the next, begging for the job until I wore her down. "Be here at one o'clock today, and don't be late," she finally said. I ran from the thrift store to my rented room to change clothes. I had seventy-five cents to my name, enough for three bus rides.

My adrenaline pumped as I hurried to the bus stop. I waited while several buses passed, but the Number 10 did not arrive. At 12:30 my anxiety turned to panic, and I raised my hand to hail a cab, just as I'd seen people do in the movies. I'd never been in a taxi before. When one stopped, I jumped in. "Where to?" the driver asked. I gave him the address and said, "Take me as close as you can for fifty cents," thinking I'd keep one quarter for the bus ride home.

"You can't go anywhere for fifty cents," he said, staring at me in the rearview mirror.

Near tears, I blurted out my story about the job, how badly I needed it, and how I had to be there by one o'clock, or I wouldn't get it. I offered him the whole seventy-five cents.

"Keep your money," he said, speeding away from the curb. I arrived in time to get my first real job, with my coins still in my sweaty hand. The cabby wished me luck and waved as I walked to the door.

I worked hard filing invoices and answering the phones. Miss Grannis taught me a lot about manners and grammar and how to dress properly, things you often don't learn in foster homes. It's too late to thank both the taxi driver and Miss Grannis for their help, but I'll never forget either of them. They were the first of many people willing to help a scared kid become what I am now: a retired psychotherapist who has tried to help as many people as possible reach their potential, no matter what the odds.

People who live out Jesus' peculiar ethic of unmerited love are everywhere, you know. I know there are a good number of you in this congregation. Some people are just loving by nature. Some are making up for past peccadillos.

Others learn just how hard life is along the way, but instead of becoming mean and cynical like many, they shift into over-drive and do what they can to make the world a better place – especially for those who came into the world luckless.

John the Baptist was a great man. He knew the times were ripe for big change. But he was wrong in thinking God was bringing history to a screeching halt. Jesus knew better.

He knew that most people respond better to carrots than big sticks with nails in them. Because, you know what? The only future worth living is a not future based on anger and punishment – no, it's one based on forgiveness and hope. That's what progressive Christianity is about and it's why this church is here on this corner.

Amen.