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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Great Expectations”

Text: Luke 7:18-28; Philippians 4:4-7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas is a season of great expectations. But expectations can be dangerous things. For expectations *met* result in great joy, while expectations *not met* can cause great disappointment. And so the child who gets what he expects for Christmas is happy, while the child who does not is disappointed.

So it is today that we hear from John the Baptist, a question of expectation: ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for [or expect] another?”***

It is a strange question, coming from John. For he was the prophet of God sent to prepare the way before the Messiah. He was the fiery preacher of repentance. He was well acquainted with Jesus, and was present at the baptism of Jesus, when God the Father spoke from the clouds and proclaimed Jesus to be His ***“beloved Son, with whom [He was] well pleased.”*** (Mt 3:17) He had pointed at Jesus and boldly proclaimed, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God.”*** (Jn 1:29) So why now this question of . . . well, doubt? Is John wavering in his faith? Or is it his disciples that he sends who need to become certain of who Jesus really is? *Is Jesus not living up to expectations?*

Well, it'd be perfectly understandable if John *was* having a crisis of faith. Especially given the fact that he has been rotting in Herod's prison for who knows how long. But more likely (and what the church has usually taught) is that John was shedding the last of his disciples. These men should be attached to Jesus, not to him. ***Jesus must increase and he must decrease***, John himself had said. (John 3:30) In fact, John must become a zero, for he was but the forerunner. The preparer. The pointer. But if he still had disciples, he wasn't there yet.

So he sends his remaining disciples – who instead of hanging around Jesus were still hanging around John in prison – he sends them to Jesus, with a question: ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for [or expect] another?”*** John knew the answer. They needed to know it too. So that they knew where to go. So that they would know where their hope lay. Especially when faced with death. When they would be called

upon to bury John's headless body in the not too distant future. What, or who, would they cling to then?

But it is not only John's disciples who need to know this – *so do we*. Because maybe *your* life isn't living up to what *you* expected. Maybe you thought the Christian life would be different – more dynamic, more holy, less ordinary. A life of constant Christmas joy. But instead maybe you feel like John, locked up in prison – only for you it is the prison of your commonplace, day-to-day life; or the prison of your job; the prison of loneliness, or the prison of having to live with difficult family or neighbors. Or maybe you are watching others struggle . . . and wonder why. Is this the Christian life? Why doesn't Jesus take care of His own? Why don't I feel His presence more? Why does it seem as if nothing is happening in my life? Or, why is what *is* happening all wrong?

But what is wrong? Jesus, or our expectations? Our expectations that are marred by sin. Our expectations that are curved in on ourselves. Our expectations that are long on happiness and short on blessedness.

And so in response to the question of John's disciples, Jesus doesn't defend Himself – but points to Himself through the prophet Isaiah. That they know who He is. That they know He is doing exactly what was foretold: ***“the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them.”*** Here is God's agenda, and it is being done. The Lamb of God is taking the sins of the world. And His Father is well pleased.

But Jesus not only addresses the disciples of John and their expectations – He then turns to the crowds, listening to all this, and addresses them (and their expectations) as well. And here, too, *we* stand, these questions being spoken to us.

And so first, Jesus asks: ***What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?*** Or for us today that would be: *what did you come here to church to hear? What did you expect?* A relativistic message which changes depending on how the winds of modern opinion are blowing? A message that will bend and change to tell you what you want to hear? That you're basically okay and success is right around the corner? **If so, you will be disappointed.**

Jesus then continues: ***What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?*** Or for us today that would be: *what did you come here to hear? What did you expect?* A health and wealth message of success and ease and privilege and wishes granted? A message about how to make your life better, and that nothing but joy is right around the corner? **If so, you will be disappointed.**

So: *What then did you do out to see? A prophet? Yes!* And you too. You have come to hear the Word of God. In truth. To be pointed to and sent to the Lamb of God. The One who has come not to coddle you, but to save you. And so you will not be disappointed! For though it may not be what you *want* to hear, it is what you *need* to hear.

And this message first is a message of **repentance**. For what? For my false expectations. For my failure to live as a Christian. For clinging to the wrong things. For my being ashamed to speak. For being too selfish to act, too lazy to go out of my way for others, too self-centered to consider the good that God is doing through the cross that He has laid on me because I am too focused on trying to get out from under it. For my desire to be blessed with ease and not with struggle. For believing the wisdom of the world and not the wisdom of God. For the *audacity* of being disappointed with God not living up to my expectations, when I fall so far short of His. *First the message is one of repentance.*

But then the message spoken here is one of **forgiveness!** That my sin and your sin, my death and your death, my self-centeredness and your self-centeredness, has been dealt with! That Jesus is *the one who was to come* – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. *Come* to take what is ours and give us what is His. *Come* to take our sin and death upon Himself on the cross, and give us the forgiveness and life of His resurrection. *Come* to open our ears to hear His Word, to open our eyes to see His goodness, to heal us from the leprosy of our sin, and to preach this Good News to we poor gathered here. Especially when we are faced with death, whether ours or a loved ones. That we know where to go. Where our hope lay. That He is the One, and there *is* no other.

And then with His forgiveness, we hear the message of **new life** in Him. That the new life, the eternal life He has promised us is not just something waiting for us in the future, but is His gift to us already now! For in Holy Baptism you have already died to the old and been raised to the new. The wealth of Heaven has been given to you. And so the life that you now live is different – not the same old life, with the same old expectations, with the same old sin – but a new life. A life of service and forgiveness and love. The life of Christ. For Christ lives in you. And as He increases in your life, *you* do not decrease – you increase too! In faith, in hope, and in love. No matter where you are, no matter the struggle, no matter what seems to be. For your life is no longer in the false expectations and perishable things of this world, but your life in hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:3)

And as great as John is – and he *is* great! *Among those born of women none is greater than John*, Jesus says. But as great as John is – did you hear? – *Jesus calls you greater*. For great are those who do great things in this world, but greater are those who hear the Word of God and keep it. (Lk 11:28) Greater are those for whom Christ has done great things! Who receive His absolution, who eat and drink His body and blood, who receive

His forgiveness and life that no struggle, no prison, no death can take away.

And that is what Christmas is all about. The advent of our Saviour. The One *come* to serve us with His very life. The Great One *come* to be nothing, that we who are nothing might be great. Yes, He is the One who came, and is coming again. That we be happy not just one day out of the year, but (as we heard from St. Paul) that we ***be not anxious about anything, but rejoice always***. Rejoicing in our Saviour, and the wonders of His love.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.