

Faith on the Edge of Unbelief

Matthew 11:2-15 – Advent Sunday 3-A

December 11, 2016

I wonder how often I have said it in my life, even as you may wonder also—how often you have said it in your life: “It wasn’t what I expected !?!”

Back in 1983, I will always remember purchasing my first home in Statesboro, Georgia; grateful that the interest rate on my mortgage had actually dropped to 13% from the 16% interest rate it would have been in the previous year! I signed the papers on that house knowing full well that my roof needed to be replaced. Therefore, immediately after the “closing,” I went to the roofing company’s office! I looked at a number of different samples of shingles—and chose one. When the job was completed, however, I was shocked to discover that the color of the shingles I had chosen appeared to be much lighter—up there on the whole house in broad daylight than it ever appeared to be to me from my simply looking at one, single, solitary shingle on the day I made that decision! No! It wasn’t what I expected it to be!

When a woman is pregnant, we say that she is “expecting” because she is expecting to give birth to a baby at some carefully calculated and conjectured time in the future!

Gardeners have expectations too! They love to plant seeds, expecting those seeds to take root, to grow and eventually produce some delicious vegetables or beautiful flowers!

Let’s face it: Expectations play a major role in each of our lives! Even when you get into your car to drive home from this worship service this morning, you will be expecting all the other drivers on the road to obey the traffic laws, not to run any red lights and to hopefully remain on their side of the highway.

Nevertheless, we all experience disappointments in life occasionally, saying to ourselves: “It wasn’t what I expected!”

When we take a close look at our Gospel lesson this morning—John the Baptist certainly appeared to be disappointed with Jesus! Why? Because Jesus did not turn out—in John’s way of thinking—to be the kind of Promised Messiah that he expected him to be!

Therefore in our Gospel lesson this morning: John the Baptist expresses his doubts about Jesus! For the first time in his life, John the Baptist finds himself on the edge of unbelief!

John the Baptist certainly had some clear expectations for the Promised Messiah, whose way into this world he had given his all whole life to prepare at the urging of the Holy Spirit! But in response to his faithfulness, John the Baptist never expected that he would one day end up in prison—in a place that the Jewish historian Josephus later designates for us to be the Fortress of Machaerus about five miles east of the Dead Sea; in a very hot and desolate environment. Although John the Baptist still had some contact with his own disciples, he was by this time 100% sidelined for his life’s work and this must have been an exceedingly hard pill for an outspoken man like John the Baptist to swallow!

Somewhere along the way, John the Baptist expresses, out loud, his great disappointment with Jesus, by confessing his troublesome doubts that then prompts him to command John’s disciples to go back to where Jesus was to ask him pointblank, “*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another*” (Matthew 11:3)?

John the Baptist was on the edge of unbelief—for at least three different reasons we can glean from this text. First of all, he was in prison! Secondly, he must have been drained emotionally. Since the Bible often compares John the Baptist to the Old Testament's Prophet Elijah, can't we do the same?

In I Kings, chapters 18 and 19, we are reminded that the Prophet Elijah had actually had the audacity to denounce the sins of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, just as John the Baptist had openly denounced the sins of Herod Antipas; who had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife—to become his own wife; his stolen paramour. Drained from this encounter, the Prophet Elijah then fled to the desert wanting to die. Would John the Baptist have been any less exhausted after all of the great demands that were made on his ministry?

Thirdly, Jesus was not living up at all to John the Baptist's expectations for the Promised Messiah; perhaps the number one reason that John the Baptist was now ON THE EDGE OF UNBELIEF.

John had formerly announced that the coming Messiah would eventually exercise a ministry of judgment, saying: "*His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire*" (Matthew 3:12)! But what did John the Baptist observe for himself with his own eyes?

On the one hand he saw that Jesus was clearly doing the kind of good deeds foretold by the Prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson today--empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so, but where was Jesus' prophesied ministry of judgment? Besides, as far as John the Baptist could see, the world was as wicked as it was before Jesus began his ministry. Maybe John the Baptist did say to himself: "This isn't what I expected!"

Well, in response to the straightforward question John the Baptist put to Jesus through the obedient response of John the Baptist's disciples, it certainly is worth noting that Jesus did not condemn John the Baptist for his doubts any more than God condemned the Prophet Elijah for his "breakdown" after the tremendous victory he had experienced over the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, only to receive Queen Jezebel's promise to even the score with Elijah because of what he had done!

The reason, of course, is that doubt is not unbelief. Instead it is something midway between faith and unbelief. Besides, doubt is a common, natural state for most of us as human beings, because in our humanity we never really see the whole picture and our thinking is often clouded by our physical condition and the extenuating circumstances that are beyond our own control.

Instead of condemning John, Jesus ministered to him by quoting to him the prophecy of Isaiah in the Old Testament lesson today in the 35th chapter of Isaiah: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight and the lame walk! Lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear! The dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them—AND BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO IS NOT OFFENDED BY ME*" (Matthew 3:4-6)!

After John's disciples began their journey to return to their imprisoned teacher, Jesus then turned to the crowd and praised John the Baptist among the people surrounding him. Jesus praised John the Baptist as a prophet; exactly what the thousands of people had gone out into the desert to see. But, said Jesus, John was even "*more than a prophet*" (v. 9)!

How so? John not only prophesied about Christ's coming but was himself a fulfillment of several distinct prophecies that are given to us about him as the forerunner of Christ in the Old Testament—especially found in Malachi 3:1, where God the Father is saying to his eternally-begotten Son, while still in his pre-incarnate state: *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you!"*

What made John so special is that he had the personal privilege of pointing out the Messiah, which none of his predecessors had done. John did no miracles (John 10:41), but he was greater, Jesus is teaching us here, than any of the earlier prophets simply because he had the job of announcing and then actually identifying Jesus as the "Christ," the Greek word in the New Testament that means the "Anointed One," just as the word "Messiah" in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament means "The Anointed One" too!

This must have been a startling statement for Jesus to make to people who knew of such great Old Testament giants as Abraham, Moses and David, not to mention Elijah, whom John resembled, who did great miracles. However, in his very next breath, Jesus says something even more startling than this, and in doing so gives to all people who genuinely are his true disciples—still in our world today—the greatest compliment possible! Jesus says: *"Nevertheless, he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11)!*

How can this be? How can the least gifted, least significant, least prominent, least outspoken of today's believers be greater than this greatest of Old Testament figures and therefore greater than all the others? For this reason: Because they can point to Jesus and witness to his work more clearly than even John the Baptist could.

But I have to share with you a very important footnote about this text! When we have doubts, we believe that the best way for God to deal with our doubts—is to give us exactly what we want, exactly when we want it. For John the Baptist—this would have meant for him his release from prison—but God didn't answer John's prayer that way, just as our Heavenly Father did not answer Christ's own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane to take the bitter cup he was now to drink and suffer away from him either! This is when real faith becomes evident to us in our lives!

But in my now wanting to bring my message to a close—I would like to call to your attention—that most of the time—expectations are a good thing—though expectations sometimes may cause us to find ourselves in somewhat of a quandary!

There are times when holding high expectations, is a good thing! Having high expectations can often incite us to reach beyond what we thought was possible. However, when our expectations are set too low, they may only serve to limit us; holding us back, keeping us down! Have you ever heard about a flea circus? Apparently, there are some human beings who have tried their best to train fleas and to a large degree have been successful!

Do you that you too could probably train fleas? You can train them, first of all, by catching some fleas and placing them in a cardboard shoe box with a top on it. The fleas will jump up and hit the top of the box over, over and over again! If you listen closely to the fleas performing their high-jumping feats in that shoebox long enough, however, you may falsely come to the conclusion that the fleas in your shoebox are dead—the farthest thing from the truth! Even though the fleas inside of that cardboard shoebox continue to jump, they stop jumping high enough to hit

the top of the box. The next thing you know is that when you then decide to take the top off the shoebox that the fleas will continue to jump, but they will not jump out of the box.

What's the reason for this? They have conditioned themselves to jump just so high, and that all then from that point forward in their lives that they will ever do—because they have become convinced by their own internal instincts that that is the highest height they could ever jump and so they no longer endeavor to jump any higher ever again!

Unfortunately, the same sad thing that happens to fleas in the physical realm can also happen to us born-again believers in the spiritual realm.

We all have expectations of what our celebration of our Savior's birth, again this year, will be like! But isn't it possible that there are times when we all have a great tendency to set our own expectations far too low; if all we plan to do is show up here on Christmas Eve and sing some well-known carols and even more as some critics might say: "Just toss around a few stale ideas"? But wouldn't we all be much more in tune with God's own Spirit if we could sing with the hymn writer:

"Christ Jesus, Lord and Savior come, I open wide my heart your home!
Oh, enter with your radiant grace, on my life's pattern shine your face!
And let your Holy Spirit guide to gracious vistas far and wide.
Our God we praise your name, forevermore the same" (LW 24:5)!

I'd like to hope that come this Christmas Eve and Christmas day we could each become more like the little boy in Sunday school class who was be prepared to play the role of the innkeeper in the upcoming Children's Christmas Program at his church. He had practiced his line faithfully again and again: "I'm sorry but there are no rooms available to you at our inn," but instead he became so "caught up" and "so" excited in the wonder of Christmas, that when his classmate playing the part of Joseph knocked on the door of his inn, that young boy opened the door enthusiastically and as widely as possible! He was so excited he couldn't restrain himself. Therefore, he shouted to Mary and Joseph at the top of his voice: "Come on in! I've been expecting you!"

May this also be true for every one of us this Christmas! Amen