What Are You Expecting to See?

We're in a season of expectations. It's December, so you can expect the weather to be a bit chilly. Your expectations have been met. Children may have certain expectations concerning what's under the tree – we'll see if those are met. Families wait with eager expectations for their loved ones from far and wide to arrive safely. Businesses have great expectations for sales this year… and the stats are in: Americans spent a record $11.8 billion just in online sales on Black Friday, a 9.1% increase! It's a season of great expectations.

But what would happen if you wake up on Christmas morning – and there's a literal lump of coal in your stocking that was so elegantly hung on the hearth? What would happen if the big beautifully wrapped present that's been sitting in the corner because it's too big to fit under the tree – what is that turned out to be a pair of sox? What if that little neatly wrapped 2 inch by 2 inch box that someone's girlfriend has been waiting for – turned out to be a literal penny, 1 single cent?

Even when you go back Bible times, you find people struggling with expectations… specifically in our Gospel reading we heard about some expectations concerning the Messiah and the forerunner of the Messiah. Last week we heard from that forerunner – and the stern message of the Law, calling people to repent of their sin for the ax is already at the root of the tree. This week we find that same forerunner – locked up in prison. Is this what John had expected to happen? Our prayer today is that the Holy Spirit would fill us with proper Biblical expectations concerning God's forerunners and God's Son – so that we can truly rejoice in the Messiah God has given us.

I. In Jesus (vv. 2–6, 11)

John the Baptist and his disciples were struggling with expectations. Is this what they expected when they "signed on" to following John, and then later, Jesus? At first things were great. Tons of people were flocking to the Jordan River, repenting, being baptized, putting their faith in the words and promises of God, knowing their sins were forgiven. It was awesome!

But then Jesus comes, and even though John openly points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, even though he says, "He must increase, I must decrease…" even with this… could John ever have expected to end up – *in prison?* Sure Jesus, go ahead and increase… I'll just fade into the background. Fading away is a lot different than being in prison. John was imprisoned by King Herod who was upset that John had the audacity to point out his sin of taking his brother's wife… and murdering his own brother.

If John's expectations of what it meant to follow Jesus were off – then his questions are certainly understandable *2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"*

Jesus calms their expectations in the most effective way – going to the Scriptures. *4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and* ***the good news is preached to the poor****.* Jesus quotes Isaiah 35. The miracles he has been doing all point to the fact that he is THEE ONE that believers throughout the ages have been expecting. He is the Promised Messiah, the one to reconcile God and man.

Jesus's work is all about reconciliation. To a degree, those physical healing actions served that purpose. Those who were afflicted would not be able to participate in the regular church life

according to the Levitical laws (Lv. 21:18). But as the Messiah, Jesus had come to atoned for the sin of the world. Soon the goal would be accomplished, the mission completed! God's grace gift who came in that lowly manger, would selflessly lay down his life on that cross for the sin of the world – and by doing so, God and man would be reconciled. God's expectations would be met – completely.

What are your expectations of the Messiah? What expectations do you have for this little babe wrapped in swaddling cloths? Jesus healed diseases back then, how come he doesn't wipe out cancer now? Jesus gave sight to the blind, why doesn't he do that for me and the ones I love? Jesus helped the lame to walk, yet replaced knees and hips don't last that long. Are there expectations you have of Jesus that he's seemingly not fulfilling?

Here's the real danger of such expectations (especially for things God has not promised in His Word): when our heart is asking *these questions*, the next questions aren't far off: "Perhaps he's not really the God I was hoping for??… Perhaps he really doesn't care about me??... Perhaps this "church thing" isn't for me??... Maybe I should look elsewhere??... Misplaced and misguided expectations easily lead one not just to doubt God, but forsake him. And when you and I put our hopes in things other that the One True God – we can most expect God's wrath and rejection.

If you are at that point, struggling with what it means to be a follower of Jesus, then we need Jesus to do for us what he did for John's disciples – point us to the Scriptures. We need to be reminded exactly what Jesus came to do for us. The Scriptures clearly show that Messiah we are to expect is one who must suffer and die for our sin. In order for there to be any hope of salvation, there has to be that Lamb of God who was led to the slaughter and laid to rest in a tomb. This is what we are to expect, because this is what God foretold – but his promises didn't end there. Jesus rose from the dead – fulfilled every promise, meeting every expectation, bring to us the very thing we need most – the forgiveness of sins – peace with God!

II. In John the Baptist (vv. 7–11)

There's a 63-year-old carol I'm sure you're hearing on the radio. Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne ask: *"Do you hear what I hear?"* The song describes how the word of the birth of the baby Jesus is relayed from one to another. It starts with the night wind, which whispers it to a little lamb. The lamb reports the message to his shepherd boy, who in turn conveys the news to the mighty king. The king eventually spreads the message to the "people everywhere."

On the surface it sounds warm and fuzzy; yet it wasn't zeal for the Gospel that inspired the writers ~ it was the threat of nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. They said that, "seeing babies pushed in strollers in New York City" is what really moved them urge listeners to "pray for peace, people everywhere." Essentially, their expectation for Jesus was a secular, worldly, temporal peace here and now. It makes you wonder what they saw in Jesus? A political leader? One who would end of *earthly* strife? Not really a Messiah to deliver from sin.

Jesus asked the crowd about their expectations of, John. *7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert* ***to see?*** *A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out* ***to see?*** *A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out* ***to see?*** *A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: " 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'*

"What did you go out **to see?**" is a penetrating question, because you don't usually go to SEE a prophet, you go to HEAR him. However, that seems to be the case here. If they were looking for fine clothing – their expectations were woefully unfulfilled. If they were looking for someone who is espousing the latest and greatest philosophies about religion… again, their expectations were dashed. John's message was as harsh as his clothing – "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." Repent! Ya, ya… heard it already! For so many, their superficial expectations led to great disappointment… but it wasn't John's fault. He remained God's faithful messenger.

Jesus put his stamp of approval John and his message. Just as the Scriptures identified Jesus as the Messiah – so too the Scriptures pointed to John as the one who will prepare the way for the Lord. And the way in which **The Way** is prepared is through the call to repent of sin. Should we be surprised by the strong call to repent during these weeks of Advent? No! The call to repent is always valid and needed for we are sinners who daily sin much. And - because we know not the day of our Lord's Second Advent – the call that our pastors and teachers and Christian brothers and sister give us to repent and prepare and keep watch – is exactly what we need. This is what made John "a great preacher;" he faithfully proclaimed God's message.

Jesus closes with an interesting statement about John and us, *"[11] I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."* At first glance this may seem like a contradiction. Remember, John was the one who bridged the gap between the Old and New Testaments. John saw what the previous prophets could only speak about. In a first-person way, he prepared people to see Jesus… but his life ended before he could see "the rest of the story."

As New Testament believers, even if we are the least, or newest, or even have the littlest in faith – we have received greater gifts than John saw. We have seen the rest of the story! We have seen the amazing growth of God's kingdom as the Gospel is now proclaim throughout the world. Baptisms happen not just at the Jordan River, but in all nations. The Lord's Supper is celebrated regularly by believers. The Holy Spirit continues to be poured out. God's church is growing. God's people are being strengthened. This is what we can expect to happen – and we rejoice as it happens - and we rejoice to be a part of it.

Dear friends, not just at Christmas, but until Christ comes again, we have so many wonderful Scriptural expectations to be anticipating. And because God is behind these expectations, we will not be disappointed. May we eagerly yearn for God to continue fulfilling every one of his promises. Amen.