

8. Greater Expectations

It was my first time in the Louvre, the famous art museum in the heart of Paris. I was 22 years old, I was in the city of love with my young bride, and we were going to see the Mona Lisa. Couldn't get much better could it?

In my mind I imagined it would be just like in the movies when people are invited to the opening of an art exhibition: everyone dressed in chic clothes; a jazz quartet playing in the background; a bench placed strategically in front of the picture so you can sit and contemplate the artistry of Renaissance expressionism. I imagined an intimate moment with one of the great artworks of the world.

If you've been to the Louvre, you know that's not what it's like. We followed the crowds, and the schoolkids, and the tour groups into the room where the Mona Lisa is displayed. There were probably 200 people in front of us clamoring for a look. There were camera flashes going off above the sea of bodies.

And then the picture itself is not big. It's maybe 2ft by 2ft. And it's behind thick glass. The painting itself is quite dark, and so it's hard to see when you're looking through a crowd. It was all a bit disappointing.

Have you ever had one of those moments when the reality didn't meet your expectations?

Our Bible passage today is all about peoples' expectations around Jesus – who he was, what came to do, what kind of difference he would make in the world, what difference he makes today... We need to get our expectations right, so that we can understand our reality.

And we're going to find out exactly what the Bible says about that in just a minute, so stick around to find out the answer.

[INTRO]

Well good morning and welcome to Yountville Community Church. My name is Dan Bidwell, Senior Pastor here and it is so good to have you with us today. We really pray that our time together helps you to connect with God, to worship, to draw near, and to know his presence as we hear him speak through his Word today. We also pray that the service today leads you into the presence of Jesus, as we think about the significance of next Sunday – of Easter, and the cross and the resurrection.

Because the cross is at the heart of the Christian message – God's love shown to us as Jesus lays down his life to bring forgiveness and to make us right with God and to give us a fresh start.

That is the hope of Jesus that we want to share in the Napa Valley and beyond. And that's the hope that will be at the centre of our church family, as we look towards reopening our historic Chapel in Yountville in just a few months. We do hope you'll join us in person or online as we continue to share and grow in Jesus.

One of the best ways to share Jesus is to share messages like this with your friends and family. It's really easy to send them to our church website, [[yountvillechurch.org on screen](http://yountvillechurch.org)] where they can get watch our latest message and connect with us also. We'll also be sharing that link on Facebook and Instagram. And remember, next week is Easter Sunday. It's one of the easiest times to invite people to church. I'll be preaching on the *rest* that we can find in Jesus, rest for he weary and the burdened.

So please share that invitation with friends and family members, remember to like and subscribe on Youtube and that will help us to share the hope of Jesus in the Napa Valley and beyond.

But for now, why don't we pray as we prepare to hear God's Word from Matthew chapter 11.

Our heavenly Father, as we read the Bible today, help us to have the right expectations of Jesus. Help us to trust him, whatever our reality might be. Help us hear the great promises that Jesus speaks into our lives, and help us to know that blessing. In his saving name we pray. Amen

What did John expect? (v2-3)

So we're picking up the story at Matthew 11:1 this morning.

And it's a kind of transitional moment in Matthew's gospel. Back in chapters 8 and 9, we saw Jesus perform miracle after miracle, huge crowds were following, and then Jesus sends out his disciples in chapter 10 to multiply Jesus' message. But now as we enter chapter 11, Jesus seems less interested in drawing a large crowd, and more interested in individual responses to him. Jesus doesn't want admirers. He wants disciples. He wants dedicated followers. He wants us to make a decision.

And so that brings us to the first character in the passage, John the Baptist.

¹ After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.^[a]

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:1-3)

John the Baptist, you might remember from the start of Matthew's gospel, was the cousin of Jesus. He was a prophet, and a bit of a strange one - he lived in the desert and dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts. But despite John's appearance, his prophetic message about the kingdom drew people from all over Jerusalem and Judea to be baptized in the Jordan. He even baptized Jesus (Matthew 3:1-6, 13-17).

John was also known for his fiery preaching, criticizing the religious elite and pronouncing their coming judgment:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? [...] ¹⁰The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:7, 10)

This same fiery preaching had landed John in prison, after he denounced the governor Herod for seducing and marrying his sister-in-law.

And it's from prison that John sends his disciple to ask Jesus that question in v3:

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3)

John's prophetic ministry was all about announcing the coming kingdom of heaven, and with it the coming of the Messiah. Messiah is the Hebrew word for 'the Anointed one.' Prophecy foretold that this anointed Messiah would come and restore God's people.

And there were expectations about what that restoration would look like. Some expected that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman rulers and re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel, returning the Lord's favor to his people.

the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Perhaps that's what John expected – freedom for the captives and the day of God's vengeance – and yet there he was locked away in prison.

Or perhaps John expected the Messiah to come with the same kind of fiery judgment that John himself preached, like the axe at the root of the tree, and the winnowing fork to throw the chaff into the fire...

Instead, Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus wasn't the Messiah that John was expecting.

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

[Like John, even today there are some churches that major on the judgment of God: fire and brimstone; and the reality of hell. That's what they expect from Jesus.

And I don't want to shy away from speaking about God's judgment. Because justice and judgment go hand in hand. God can't be just if he doesn't condemn evil and punish wickedness. And the Bible speaks about the day of judgment, which will come – in fact by the end of our passage today Jesus will pronounce judgment on the people who had seen his miracles and not believed.

But is judgment the main message of the Bible? Are we to be terrified into following Jesus? Is that what we should expect from Jesus?

Jesus answers John's question by pointing to the evidence. The evidence tells us what kind of Messiah we ought to expect.

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^[b] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the

good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

The evidence points to a Messiah who brings hope and healing. The Messiah comes with good news, not just judgment. The Messiah comes to usher in a kingdom where physical illnesses are no more, where darkness and evil are done away with, where even death comes untrue. A kingdom where God’s favor is on his people. That’s what Jesus wants us to see when we look at him – the Messiah who restores us to the Lord.

And that’s the good news of the Christian message, and the good news of Easter. Because at the cross God’s justice and mercy meet. God’s justice is satisfied as he pours out his judgment for human sin. But God’s mercy is shown as the sinless savior sacrifices himself in our place, dying to bring us life. Yes, the gospel includes judgment, but we must never forget the grace and mercy and love that provides a way for us to avoid the judgment we deserve for our own sin.

If we’re to sum up what John was expecting, it seems like his expectation for the Messiah was only part of the picture of what Jesus came for. A bit like the parable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant by touching one part of it, John only had a partial understanding of God’s plan.

And I think that’s true for the crowds also.

What did the crowds expect?

What expectations did the crowds have of Jesus?

Remember we’ve just come out of those chapters where Jesus went from town to town healing every sickness and casting out demons. And people came from everywhere to be have their lives changed.

And perhaps that’s what the crowds thought the Messiah should do. Bring healing and relief from physical discomfort. That’s another way to read the Isaiah 61 passage that we had up a few moments ago – the Messiah brings freedom from our captivity to illness.

And it’s true that Jesus sometimes does bring physical healing. It was certainly a big feature of his ministry, and for the first Apostles. But is that what we expect the Messiah to do in every life? Is it through a miracle ministry that we expect to draw people to Jesus? Do people come to faith principally through seeing signs and wonders?

The answer is no, it seems. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 11:20

²⁰ Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. (Matthew 11:20)

Despite all the miracles, all the healings, it seems that the vast number of people didn’t respond to Jesus with faith. They didn’t recognize him as the Messiah who would usher in God’s kingdom. They didn’t turn their lives back to God. Instead they turned away and went on with their lives. The miracles didn’t produce faith, or mostly not, it would seem.

I think a lot of people fall into the same category as the crowd when it comes to their expectations of Jesus. They're interested in Jesus when they need him. They want somebody who will heal their wounds, remove their infirmities, and restore their joy in the present. They want a genie in a bottle. Rub the magic lamp, and get whatever you want. They make Jesus into a bespoke savior, who does our bidding only when we need him, but other than that I live my life however I want.

The problem is when the magic lamp stops working. What happens if Jesus doesn't do your bidding? What if your life is not what you expected it to be? What happens if the miracles don't come?

Sadly Jo and I watched one of our friends walk away from Jesus because her sister got sick, and our friend thought that Jesus should heal every sickness. That was 25 years ago and I don't think she's changed her mind.

But if physical healing is our only expectation of Jesus, again we're like the blind men trying to describe the elephant when they've only touched one part. It's partly true, but there's a bigger picture we need to see.

And that's what Jesus reveals in the next passage.

What did Jesus expect?

So what did Jesus say we should expect of him? If he's not just a judge, and not just a miracle worker, then how are we to understand him?

Jesus reveals the answer when he talks to the crowd.

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness 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."

You see, crowds had flocked to John, just as they had flocked to Jesus. But Jesus asks the crowd what they went out to see? Did they just go for the spectacle, the experience, the brush with celebrity?

Whatever reason they went for, they saw a prophet. And not just any prophet, Jesus says, but the prophet who would prepare the way for the Lord. The prophet whose ministry would signal the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. A pivotal moment of prophetic fulfillment, where all the hopes of the Old Testament were finally coming to fruition.

God's plan was being revealed before their eyes, for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

Jesus explains to the crowd that, yes, he is the one who was to come. They shouldn't expect anyone else. All the signs were there to be seen. Even the return of Elijah that the great OT prophet who Malachi said would precede the return of the Lord, Jesus says that had been fulfilled in John the Baptist

if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. (Matthew 11:14)

Elijah had come, and that made Jesus none other than the Lord himself. The Messiah. Jesus says there is no other sign you need, no other prophecy, no other miracle to confirm who he is. Jesus is the king who will bring in the kingdom of heaven.

And again, this is where expectation and reality can be confusing. Because, so many people had expectations about what the kingdom of heaven should be like. And the reality didn't match their expectation.

And 2000 years later, some people are still confused because their expectation of what God should do in the world doesn't match their expectation. Why is it that we still live in a world with illness, and evil and death, when the Messiah has already come? Shouldn't he have removed all that when he brought the kingdom of heaven near?

Well that last little word, near, is the key to our expectations of Jesus in this age.

Jesus first sermon was this:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

With Jesus we see the beginning of the kingdom breaking in. But we don't see the ultimate fulfillment. We see the beginning of the restoration of God's people, with those healing miracles. But we don't see every illness ended, and death continues to reign. And the same with evil – while Jesus deals with some instances of demonic possession, the evil one still rules the hearts of every son of Adam and daughter of Eve.

Our vision is still partial. The kingdom is near, but not completely at hand. Now and not yet.

And if the Bible ended at the chapter we are reading, we wouldn't know how the story will end. Like John and the crowds, we might speculate about how God would achieve the ultimate victory, how he would vindicate his people, how he would bring judgment, and how his people would be redeemed.

They had no idea.

But we do. We've seen the cross. And we've seen the resurrection.

As William Barclay said:

“The man who has seen the cross has seen the heart of God in a way that no man who lived before the cross could ever see it.”

And that's why we live in an age so much greater than the age of the prophets. So much greater than the age of miracles. Because we live in the age of the kingdom of heaven, the age where God's plan has been revealed as fully as it will be before the second coming of Jesus.

Jesus said:

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11)

Brothers and sisters, we're privileged to see God's plan of salvation, to have it revealed for us in all its splendor. And that means we can live with right expectations for this lifetime and the next. We can live in this in-between world, holding onto hope for ourselves, and holding hope out to those who are looking for a miracle. But knowing that no matter what, the kingdom is coming when all of those hints of the kingdom will be seen in their fullness. When the partial becomes whole. When life becomes eternal life.

Isn't that something to look forward to?

Will you pray with me?

