

Sixth Sunday of Advent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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In last week's gospel, we meet John the Baptist. We heard him crying out on the margins wanting us to embrace God's way of just living. We heard that John was the first century equivalent to a hype man or a hype gal—that is, the one who is responsible for increasing an audience's excitement. Then, after all that hype, John the Baptist asks the silliest of questions, namely “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” It's an odd question. I mean, hasn't John been hyping the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One for years? And, isn't that what landed him in jail? Now, one could assume that it was because John hadn't observed Jesus, after all, John was incarcerated. But, perhaps, John really didn't know if Jesus was or was not the messiah. Maybe, just maybe, John, like the many others in Matthew's gospel, really didn't know for sure.

Now, it wouldn't be all that out of the ordinary for John to at least have a little doubt in his mind. After all, the Pharisees, the disciples, and many Jewish people of the time imagined that the messiah would be a military ruler. They assumed that the messiah would dominate the powers of the world with power and might. They believed that the best way to respond to violence is to confront it with more violence. But, if we kept reading in Matthew after today's gospel, we'd find that Jesus begins to talk about how violence has plagued the kingdom of heaven, or another way to say “kingdom of heaven” is God's vision for the world. Yet, Jesus doesn't respond with more violence, Jesus, instead, brings a vision of healing. You see, Jesus is doing something a bit unexpected, and in Matthew's gospel, expectations take genuinely good, Godly people

and block them from experiencing God's presence. For, their clearly-defined expectations for the messiah caused them uncertainty. Their expectations wreaked havoc.

Isn't that the case for us in our lives? Unmanaged, uncommunicated, and unrealistic expectations cause us all a lot of pain, trouble, and conflict. In the business world, managing expectations is key to your rapport with your client, your supervisor, and your direct reports. Relationship counselors note that some of the most common causes of conflict are unmanaged or uncommunicated expectations. And, when I hear about the hurt, pain, dissatisfaction, and frustration that people have with God, I can almost always trace it back to unrealistic, unbiblical, and unmanaged expectations. For, we live in a world where our expectations run rampant. Based on our experiences and our received theology along with cultural norms, wishful thinking, and misconceptions we set a lot of unrealistic and unhelpful expectations. It's the expectation that we always need to be happy; the expectation that we need to be fit, tan, and young like airbrushed models; the expectation that we need to have a plan and a path for everything; the expectation that we should be married, have children, and should always be climbing the ladder at work. And, these expectations drive us mad. We get so overwhelmed and confused that we, like John the Baptist, sometimes need to take a step back and re-evaluate our expectations to see if they're in alignment with God's vision.

And, so, John asked the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And, Jesus told John's disciples to tell John about all that they had seen. Jesus said to tell John about the miraculous healing, about the way Jesus has brought life to those who were weighed down, and how Jesus liberated the oppressed. For, Jesus's vision for the world, was not, exactly, aligned with commonplace expectations.

After all, Jesus was not the military ruler that would come to defeat their enemies. Rather, Jesus came to confront a system built on violence and revenge and to, instead, replace it with a forgiveness. Jesus came to replace the honor found in ego, pride, and paternalism, with the honor bestowed in humble service. Jesus came to remind us that wealth isn't found in fancy cars, beautiful homes, and the best investments, but rather that true wealth comes from generously giving it away in gratitude for God's abundance. So, yeah, Jesus toppled the religious leaders' expectations. So, it's no wonder that, in the midst of all the healing, teaching, preaching, and alignment with the marginalized, they wanted to kill him. For the economic system that Jesus brought, wasn't flattering. It didn't fit into their expectations. And, because their expectations were so firm, they didn't notice God's presence in front of them.

That is the challenge of our faith life—namely, to not allow our unrealistic expectations of God and others stand in the way of experiencing God's presence. So, what I'd invite you to do is to take out the white paper from your bulletin and write down as many expectations or assumptions you have about God. Write down who or what you think about God. Or, write down what others think about God.

You see, when we challenge the assumptions that only straight, white, males can serve as pastors, then we can begin to see the many faces that can bring God's good news to outcast. When we challenge the inaccurate belief that God bestows wealth on the faithful, then we can notice that, throughout the scriptures, God prefers to be among the poor. When we begin to see that God does not rule with an iron fist but rather as a suffering servant, then we can begin to hold up leaders that advocate for true peace, for non-violent justice, and who welcome the stranger. You see, when we begin to shed the false expectations that we've set for God and for others, then we can see God among us. We can see God in the refugee and the asylum seeker. We can see

God in those who mourn and worry. We can see God in the sick and the suffering. We can see God in the storm and in the cold. We can see God in the atheist and the Muslim. We can see God in so many places once we realize that God will be present with or without us.

So, my dear friends, in this season of advent, we gather with hopeful hearts to familiarize ourselves with a God who disrupts our expectations. So, my prayer is that you can take this next year, just one year, to remove your expectations from our God. Just get rid of those death-dealing expectations. Then, come to this place and get to know God anew. Just let God's presence transform you and transform us.

To help us visualize this, I invite you to take your piece of paper and crumble it up. Then, on the count of three, we're going to throw it up front. Ready? 1..2..3.. Then, when we come together today at this table to be fed and sustained by a God who doesn't play by the world's expectations, stamp on those expectations. Squish them. And, just, let them go.

For, when we shed our expectations of God and each other, once we realize that we are all God's beloved children and that the earth we share is God's gift, then we, like John the Baptist, might come to see the Christ among us. We might see the ways that God takes brokenness and brings healing. We might experience the ways God brings justice to the margins. And with that, we might just experience the dirty, homeless, Christ child right here in our midst. For our loving God is among us, within us, and around us in the places where we expect to see God the least. Thanks be to God for this gift, for God's presence, and for God's never-ending love. Amen.