

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In last week's gospel, we met John the Baptist. We heard him calling people to turn toward God's way of justice and renewal. And, John was, in many ways, the first-century equivalent of a hype person—the person sent ahead to stir anticipation and build excitement. And, after all that hype, John asks an unimaginable question. From prison, he asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” And it seems jarring. John had spent years proclaiming that the Messiah. His bold preaching and public witness landed him in jail. How could he now be uncertain?

We could assume John was confused because he couldn't see Jesus's ministry firsthand – after all he was in prison. But Matthew's gospel suggests something deeper. Perhaps John really didn't know. Perhaps, like so many others in Matthew's story, John himself was wrestling with doubt—wondering whether Jesus fit his expectations of the Messiah.

And honestly, that wouldn't be unusual at all. Many faithful people in Jesus's time—including the Pharisees, the disciples, and much of the broader Jewish community—expected the Messiah to be a military leader, someone who would overthrow Rome and restore Israel through force. After all, violence was (and is) the language of empire, and many assumed God would answer violence with even greater violence.

But Jesus doesn't do that. If we keep reading in Matthew's gospel, Jesus talks about how violence has plagued what Matthew calls "the kingdom of heaven"—or in other words, God's vision for the world. Yet instead of responding with power and domination, Jesus responds with healing. He restores sight, mobility, dignity, and hope. He brings good news to the poor and liberation to those who are weighed down.

You see, Jesus is doing something deeply unexpected. And in Matthew's gospel, expectations—especially rigid, unexamined expectations—have a way of blocking even faithful, well-intentioned people from recognizing God's presence right in front of them. Their certainty becomes an obstacle, and their expectations create confusion, disappointment, and resistance.

But, that dynamic isn't limited to the first century. It's deeply familiar to us, too. After all, unmanaged, unspoken, and unrealistic expectations cause enormous pain in our lives. In workplaces and relationships alike, uncommunicated expectations are among the leading sources of conflict and resentment.

And when people talk about their frustration, hurt, or disappointment with God, I can almost always trace it back to expectations—expectations that are unrealistic, unbiblical, or unexamined. We live in a world where expectations run rampant, shaped by cultural norms, received theology, wishful thinking, and fear.

We're told we should always be happy and productive. That we should have a plan, a path, and visible markers of success. That adulthood and faith should look one very specific way. These expectations exhaust us. They

confuse us. And sometimes they push us to a place where, like John, we must stop and ask hard questions—questions not because our faith is weak, but because we are trying to be honest with ourselves.

If you noticed, Jesus didn't scold John for asking. He didn't demand certainty. Instead, he told John's disciples to report what they observed: the blind received sight, the lame walked, those who were cast aside are restored to community, and good news was proclaimed to the poor. In other words, Jesus points not to power, but to presence. Not to domination, but to transformation.

And the reality is that Jesus's vision for the world did not align with the common expectations of his time. He did not arrive as a conquering hero. Instead, he confronted systems built on violence, revenge, and exclusion and replaced them with forgiveness, mercy, and healing. He replaced honor rooted in ego and status with honor found in humble service. He challenged the belief that wealth is proof of blessing and insisted that true abundance is discovered through generosity and trust in God's provision.

And yes—this vision can feel deeply unsettling. It disrupts religious, political, and economic systems that benefit from the status quo. So, it's no wonder that Jesus's ministry provoked fear and hostility. Expectations were so firmly held that many could not recognize God's presence standing right before them.

The challenge of our faith is to not allow our expectations of God—or of one another—block us from experiencing God's living presence. And that challenge feels especially sharp in 2025. We are tired. Many of us are

carrying grief we never fully named. We are navigating political division, institutional erosion, economic anxiety, climate fears, and a relentless pressure to perform when so much feels fragile. In a world that demands answers, efficiency, and quick fixes, waiting on God can feel unbearable.

And yet—this is precisely the moment when honest faith sounds like John’s question rather than confident slogans on kitschy Christmas decor. So, I invite you into some honest moments. If you’re able, take out the white piece of paper from your bulletin. And I invite you to write down your expectations of God: ponder the questions: Who or what is God? What should God do? ((You might write your own beliefs, or the expectations you’ve absorbed from culture, church, or family.)) Keep writing and when you’re done hold those expectations in your hand.

In today’s gospel through John’s witness, we are invited to challenge our assumptions about God. For when we let go of our expectations, we begin to see God in unexpected people and places. But letting go is not easy. Expectations cling to us and we hold on to them. So, I want to invite us to do something physical —because sometimes our bodies need to practice what our minds already know. Now, I invite you to take that paper with those expectations and crumple it up. Really crumple it—hear the sound, feel it resist. Now, on the count of three, I’m going to invite you to toss those crumpled expectations into the aisles—not at one another, but into the shared space we walk together. This isn’t about being neat or orderly. It’s about a visible release. Ready? One... two... three.

And later today, we will gather at this table to be fed and sustained and notice what’s in the aisles beneath your feet. As you come forward, walk on those

expectations. Trample them—not in anger, but in freedom. Let them be crushed under the promise that God is bigger, kinder, and more surprising than anything we could script. We trample them not because expectations are evil, but because they are not of God. We trample them as we prepare not for a God who meets our expectations, but for a God who lovingly disrupts them.

As we enter into our yearlong study of Matthew's gospel, I pray that you loosen your grip on these expectations that drain life and joy. Toss them aside. Come ready to encounter God anew. Let God's presence shape you, and reshape us together. Because when we release our expectations of God and of one another, we may finally recognize Christ among us. We may see how God brings healing out of brokenness, justice to the margins, and hope to places we thought were beyond redemption. And in that, we may discover—like John—that the Messiah comes not as we expected, but exactly as we need. Thanks be to God. Amen.