

Getting Jesus Wrong
Matthew 11:2-11
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Third Sunday of Advent
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I read a thing one time about an orphanage and the couples, the “potential parents,” who would come to the orphanage school during the day and visit with the children and see if they connected with one of them. These couples would come and go, usually leaving with a smiling baby or a slightly confused toddler.

The older children watched these potential parents come and go, come and go, as they got older and older and less and less appealing as adoptees. One of the older children put her plight into words.

Every time a couple entered the room, no matter what they looked like, my heart would skip a beat. I knew it probably wouldn't happen, that they probably wouldn't pick me, but every time I hoped with every part of myself that they would be the ones.

My eyes would follow them as they wandered around the room, picking up babies, talking to children, and I would stare at my potential Mom and my potential Dad and dare to whisper, “Are you the ones? Are you the ones? Are you the ones?”
[Story told by Mindy Douglas Adams, Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, December 2, 2007]

Are you the ones, or do I have to wait for another?

The people of Israel had been waiting for a very long time. Even John the Baptist would tell you that he had been waiting for a very long time. He and his disciples needed to know the truth. There was one answer they hoped desperately for. But they had to ask. They had to know.

So John's messengers came to Jesus and asked him, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

All this time John had been talking about how he's coming, one who is more powerful than I is coming the messiah is coming. All this time he had been preaching about the coming Christ.

All this time John had been warning his listeners about the judgment day that was on its way with the Messiah.

Sometimes, when expectation collides with reality, there's a letdown, there's a problem. Expectation is a powerful thing; unmet expectation can cause problems. That's what happened to John. Not right away, but later on, in our text for today, Matthew 11:2-11.

Evidently, after watching Jesus work for a while, John had some second thoughts. And it's really no great surprise.

John was in prison. What happened is this. Herod Antipas was the ruler in Galilee at this time, and his brother Philip ruled the land just north of there.

Herod Antipas' brother Philip was married to their niece. Follow this closely. Philip was married to his niece, the daughter of another brother of theirs, Aristobulus.

While Philip's back was turned, his brother Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, took Herodias, the niece, to be his wife. Two brothers married to a niece.

Well, John didn't think too highly of incest and adultery, so he turned his fiery rhetoric on Herod, the ruler of Galilee. And John ended up in prison.

And while John is in prison, he sends word by his disciples to go to Jesus with this question and wait for an answer: Are you the one who is to come? Are you the one I was preaching about? Are you the messiah? Or are we to wait for another?

Now why would John say such a thing? How could John, this preacher of wind and fire, this one who proclaimed that the messiah was coming, this one who was there at Jesus' baptism and heard the voice of God come down out of heaven, this John who seemed plagued by anything but doubt, how could John ask such a question. Are you the one?

Maybe it's because he had been sitting alone too long in that dark prison cell. There he lies depressed and forgotten, and he becomes haunted with doubts. Out of his dejection and discouragement he sends this question to Jesus.

I don't think that's it—at least that's not all of it.

Look at what the text says. *When he heard what Jesus was doing, he sent word by his disciples.* When he heard what Jesus was doing.

John begins to doubt because his expectation had collided with the reality. It doesn't seem to John like Jesus is laying the ax at the root of the trees. It doesn't seem like Jesus is setting fire to barren limbs.

[Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A, Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, James Newsome]

John preached hard justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain. Jesus preached a forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye.

John said people had better save their skins before it was too late. Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late.

John ate locusts and wild honey in the desert with the church crowd. Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with about as sleazy a bunch as you could find.

John crossed over to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners coming his way. Jesus almost seemed to prefer the company of sinners to that of the W.M.U., the men's Bible study, and the deacons all rolled into one.

[Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures]

He is coming, John had declared. And then, when he came, John said, *Are you the one?*

So the messengers came to Jesus and asked him, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

And Jesus said, *What did you expect?* Actually what Jesus said was: *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

Jesus was not all wind and fire. He wasn't all about blowing away the chaff or burning up the deadwood. Jesus' ministry was not so much thunder and lightning as it was the gentle rain of healing and good news.

John begins to doubt because what Jesus is doing does not seem to match up with John's expectation. John got Jesus wrong. John expected judgment over mercy, destruction over forgiveness.

And I can see the sermon shaping up very easily from there, where I say something like: *There goes John again, saying, 'Bring it on!' to destruction, but look: Jesus is more interested in healing than burning down, more interested in raising the dead than smiting the wicked.*

I get how John got Jesus wrong—or at least how he would come to need the clarification that he was seeking. I get how John got Jesus wrong. That's an easy sermon to preach. It would make us all feel good.

But I have an issue with preaching at the people who aren't in the room. That's too easy.

I went to a Baptist Association meeting one time in Texas where the Association leader preached a fiery sermon condemning people who don't believe the Bible. He actually said that the Pope didn't believe in a literal hell, but he sure would start believing in it as soon as he got there. He said something about how the Pope would believe it when the smoke from the lake of fire reached his nostrils.

This was my last Baptist Association meeting.

You should have heard the “amens” and seen the nodding of heads as this preacher preached about people who don't believe the Bible and the Pope. Everybody loved it.

Of course they loved it. This was a group of people who had come together for a Baptist Association meeting. People who don't believe the Bible don't go to Baptist Association meetings. Neither was the Pope at the meeting. Everybody loved that fiery sermon because it was directed at all the people who were not in the room. It was directed at “them.”

We love to hear about other people—“them”.

The easiest sermon for me to preach today would be the one about how John the Baptist got Jesus wrong. I could talk about all those judgmental people who condemn sinners, who want Jesus to take the winnowing fork to sinners.

Maybe I could talk about Fred Phelps, that Baptist preacher who leads his little congregation to picket the funeral of people

who die of AIDS, telling grieving families that their loved one deserved his fate, that it was God's wrath.

I get how people like that get Jesus wrong.

That's an easy sermon—the one about how John and all those judgmental people get Jesus wrong.

The harder sermon to preach, though, is not how John got Jesus wrong but how we get Jesus wrong.

I guess there may be a few in this room who still expect the incineration of wickedness that John anticipated and who may be as eager for it as John seems to be.

But the truth is, the crowd I usually hang around with, and most of us in this sanctuary today, are way too polite and politically sensitive and sophisticated to sound much like John the Baptist when we see human sin.

Our crowd's problem is not that we, like John, think the Messiah will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire when he comes.

Our problem is that I think we really do not expect much of anything to change with the Messiah's advent.

It is not that we think he will be vindictive and we are just too gleeful about that—or at least it is not usually that. Instead, our problem is that I think sometimes in reality we don't expect the coming of Jesus to really do much of anything.

Do we really expect Jesus to radically change the world and our lives, or do we just hope he'll maybe take the edge off? Jesus, the analgesic. Jesus, maybe a little something for the pain.

[this idea of how we get Jesus wrong comes from Mary Hinkle's blog, "Pilgrim Preaching," December 12, 2004]

Maybe the way we get Jesus wrong is not so much that we are expecting the wrong thing but that we are not expecting enough.

Do we understand that this Messiah who comes intends to open the eyes of the blind, to raise the dead, to give the poor a real future and a hope?

I'm talking about myself here about not expecting enough. I tend to be pretty reasonable about what will and will not happen. I tend to be pretty much reliant on my own abilities to handle things. I tend to be pretty resigned to things that don't seem like there's anything I can do about it. And, here, for a living, I read a set of documents that ends with the risen Jesus saying, *See, I am making all things new* [Rev 21:5].

John's expectation of the Messiah might have been too vengeful; our expectation of the Messiah is likely too small.

We fumble around in the darkness without expecting more, without expecting that maybe it doesn't have to be this way.

The dimmer switch for our dining room chandelier went out last May. I knew that I needed to get someone to come replace it. But I just never seemed to get around to it. So all through

the summer and all through the fall we had no light in our dining room.

Several times we had people over for dinner, and before they got there we remembered that we had no light. We would bring in a lamp. Put a bunch of candles on the table. I never could remember to get someone to come out and fix it.

All of a sudden a couple of weeks ago on a Sunday afternoon I had this preposterous thought: I could go to Home Depot and get a new dimmer switch and replace the old one. In six months of darkness it had never occurred to me that I could do that.

I got out all of my tools—two screwdrivers. I took out the old dimmer switch, took it with me to Home Depot, and bought a fancy new switch that had the same meaningless-to-me numbers on it as the old one.

I was fiddling with the wires in the box there in the wall and was reminded that I needed to cut the power off when I felt a little jolt in my fingers. It was late in the afternoon by now and starting to get dark. I went out to the breaker box to find the one for the dining room and turn it off.

The only flashlight I could find had batteries in it that were in the throes of death. The light the flashlight put out was about the equivalent of one birthday cake candle. I could barely read the labels on the breakers and couldn't tell for sure which was for the dining room. So I pretty much turned off every switch for the whole house. There was one that said "washer/dryer", and I did leave that one alone.

I went back inside, twisted the color coordinated wires together, turned on the new dimmer switch, and nothing happened. I still had to go out and flip all the breakers back on. I did that, and it worked. There was light. I couldn't believe it. Other than having to now reset every clock in the house, my work was basically done.

You wouldn't believe the satisfaction I felt when that light came on. For six months our dining room was a dark place, and it never once occurred to me that I had the power to make it light again.

Maybe you've been sitting there in the dark for far too long because it has never occurred to you to expect more. To expect that the coming of the Messiah into the world really makes a difference—the difference between dark and light.

You know, John the Baptist's question to Jesus in this week's text, along with Jesus' answer, I think it ought to have the effect of opening our eyes a little. Maybe John's question and Jesus' answer will open our eyes to formerly unexpected messianic activity in our lives and in the lives of those we know.

Maybe if we expect more we'll see more. You can go and tell John what you see and hear.

One of us is walking again after being laid low by grief for years on end.

Another can actually hear it and believe it now when someone says to her, *I love you*.

Another of us is beginning to feel that he doesn't have to yell, *Unclean!* or do a dozen equally drastic things to keep people at a distance.

[ideas here draw upon a paragraph in Barbara Brown Taylor's untitled advent sermon in Duke Chapel on December 12, 2004]

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Could this be the Messiah?

John almost missed the coming of the Messiah because he expected Jesus to be different than he turned out to be.

What a shame it would be if you and I missed the Messiah, not because we expected the wrong thing, but because we didn't really expect much of anything.

Here we were, just going about our lives, trying to get by, trying to fulfill our obligations, and it never occurred to us to expect more.

When it comes to the coming of the Messiah, what are you expecting? What are you looking for? What are you hoping for?