

## **WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?**

## **MATTHEW 11:1-10**

Christmas is a time of expectations. And sometimes expectations are a problem. What expectations would you have for someone named “Superman”? Swedish tax authorities thought that anyone named “Superman” would inevitably get picked on so they declined a request from Sara Leisten to name her newborn son after the superhero. Apparently, in Sweden government officials have veto power over names parents want to give their children. They nixed Staalman (Swedish for “Superman”) citing it’s potential to attract ridicule later in life. The decision prompted complaints of inconsistency in applying the law. Previously, names such as Batman, Tarzan, and Asterix have been permitted. The boy’s parents wanted this name for their son because he was born with one arm pointing skyward, posed in the way Superman flies. Sara Leisten plans to re-apply, this time with the name Staalmannen (Swedish for “The Superman”). If it’s approved, one thing is clear, little Superman will have a name he can never live up to. Sometimes expectations are a problem.

During this year’s Advent season, I want to ask and try to answer three questions with you – questions you often hear or ask yourself during the Christmas season. Last week, we considered the question, “Are you prepared?” Today, the question is “What do you expect?” Today’s Bible story is all about expectations. Jesus has just begun his public ministry. John the Baptist, his biological cousin, has been thrown in jail by King Herod. You might recall that John was a prophet sent by God to prepare people spiritually for the coming of Jesus. John was the kind of guy who called a spade a spade. If he had a middle name, it was probably Confrontation. King Herod had seduced his sister-in-law and gotten her to marry him. John called it what it was: adultery. He told the king to his face that he was wrong. So Herod threw John into prison.

While in prison, John must have thought a great deal about Jesus. John had followers who apparently were able to visit him in jail. They must have had lots of discussions about Jesus with John. The question these friends of John bring to Jesus is intriguing, “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (Matt. 11:3 NLT) You get the impression that Jesus just didn’t meet all their expectations – maybe not even John the Baptist’s expectations - of what a Messiah would do or say. Expectations. Christmas is a time that’s full of them. For instance, Christmas is a reminder that, first of all...

## **EXPECTATIONS ARE A PART OF LIFE.**

Have you ever noticed that Christmas is an “expectation rich” time of year? Maybe that’s why it can also be a time of great disappointment. I like the story of a boy who was frankly disappointed with Santa. So he wrote him a letter. “Dear Santa: you did not bring me anything good last year. You did not bring me anything good the year before that. This is your last chance. Alfred.” Sure, some of our Christmas expectations are trivial. You expect to hear certain kinds of

music or songs. You expect people to decorate their homes. You expect to receive Christmas cards or e-mails from family and friends. You expect to enjoy certain kinds of food. For instance, I dearly love eggnog. But this is the only time of year that I can remotely justify indulging in this “heart attack in a glass.”

But, some of our Christmas expectations are not so trivial. Like what? You expect Christmas to be a time of year that brings some happiness into your life. You expect Christmas to provide a measure of peaceful, joyful feelings. You expect Christmas to be a time of family togetherness. Isn't that why we feel disappointed if those deeper expectations aren't met? If you feel sad or lonely at Christmas, it doesn't seem right. If you feel stressed out and anxious at Christmas, something's wrong. If you're separated from or you feel estranged from your family at Christmas, it feels worse than at other times in the year.

But expectations don't begin and end with the Christmas season. Expectations are everywhere; they permeate our lives in many different ways. The author, V.S. Naipaul, writes, “One isn't born one's self. One is born with a mass of expectations, a mass of other people's ideas – and you have to work through it all.” That's true, isn't it? Expectations are a major part of life. As you drove to church this morning, you had expectations of yourself and the other people using the highway as to keeping certain traffic laws. If you're a gardener and you plant some seeds, you expect flowers, or vegetables or whatever. If you're a teacher or a student, you have expectations. If you work, you have expectations. If you're married, you have expectations of your spouse. If you're a parent, you have expectations about your kids. If you're a member of this church, you have expectations of what should and should not happen here.

And, isn't it also true, that expectations can be either positive or negative? For instance, if you have high expectations of yourself – or if someone else has high expectations of you – they can provide a wonderful kind of motivation. High expectations can make you grow, stretch, achieve and go beyond what you thought you could do otherwise. By the same token, expectations can have a powerfully negative influence. When the expectations that you have of yourself or that you have of others are unfair, unrealistic or just plain wrong, they have the power to limit, imprison, or defeat others or yourself. The Jewish people knew God was going to send someone great to them that they referred to as the Messiah. But all sorts of expectations had gotten attached to who this person would be, how he would act, what he would say, etc. Jesus, who indeed was and is the Messiah prophesied about in the Old Testament, simply did not fit in with a lot of Jewish expectation regarding the Messiah. Their erroneous expectations blinded them to the true Messiah who was right there in their midst. Even John the Baptist and some of his followers were struggling with expectations about Jesus. Here's another thought. Christmas is a reminder that...

**GOD DOESN'T EXIST TO MEET MY EXPECTATIONS.**

Jesus had little interest in meeting human expectations. Just think about all the expectations He refused to meet during the time He physically walked around on the planet. For instance, people want respectable heroes. Jesus was born of a virgin. No one expected that! Apparently, Jesus never felt the need to explain His miraculous conception to anyone although people questioned the legitimacy of His birth. He was born into what we would think of as a lower middle, working class family. There was certainly nothing royal or noble about it. Jesus didn't meet the expectations of his own brothers and sisters. When He began His public ministry, apparently all or most of them didn't believe in Him. Jesus certainly didn't meet the expectations of the religious leaders of His day. In fact, it seems like Jesus went out of His way to get on their bad side. He challenged their view of God, questioned their spirituality and pointed out their hypocrisy.

Jesus had no interest in fulfilling the expectations of at least some Jewish people in His day that the Messiah would be this great political, military leader that would save Israel from the Romans and establish Israel again as a sovereign nation. Jesus raised no army and led no armed rebellion. He even told Pontius Pilate that His Kingdom was not of this world. But the most graphic example of Jesus' complete disregard for human expectations is the cross itself. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, even His own disciples thought His ministry had come to an end in failure and shame. No one expected that a public execution was God's method of bringing salvation to the whole world. And certainly no one expected Jesus to rise from the dead either! Dead people don't come back to life! Jesus had no desire, no interest in and no need to meet human expectations.

That reminds me of something I easily forget. If God wasn't interested in meeting human expectations when His Son, Jesus, walked the Earth, why do I think He's concerned about meeting my expectations today? People today expect Jesus to be a model of what they consider to be spiritual tolerance and inclusivity. But Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NLT) People today expect Jesus to promote the idea that everyone will just end up in Heaven eventually. But Jesus said most human beings will end up in Hell. "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it." (Mt 7:13-14 NLT)

And here's something else. Jesus is just as unconcerned about meeting the expectations of those of us who trust in Him and try to follow Him. For instance, as a follower of Jesus, you expect Jesus to forgive your sins when you confess them to Him. And He does! But along with that expectation, there can also creep into your expectations of Jesus that He should practice a kind of endless patience with your entrenched disobedience, your spiritual stubbornness, and your perpetual self-centeredness. But Jesus makes it clear that God disciplines whom He loves. "My child, don't make light of the LORD's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the LORD disciplines those he loves, and he

punishes each one he accepts as his child.” (Heb 12:5-6 NLT) I don’t find that verse particularly comforting. Frankly, it makes me nervous. I’ve been “spanked” by the Lord before and it’s likely to happen again. It’s no fun. As followers of Jesus, we are apt to think that He has made us His top priority. But Jesus made it clear that lost people were His top priority. He said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” (Lk 19:10 NLT)

Frankly, many followers of Jesus act and behave as if God exists to make us happy. We expect Jesus to heal us when we get sick. We expect Jesus to answer every prayer request we make in the way and at the time we want it answered. We expect Jesus to rescue us from every difficulty we face in life. We expect Jesus to heal every broken relationship. Have we ever truly grappled with what Jesus said? “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 NLT) You’ve heard that rather harsh, compassionless observation: “Life is hard. Then you die.” Jesus might agree with that observation up to a point. His perspective is something like this: “Life is hard. They you die. And then the most wonderful part of your life begins.”

So what do you expect? The season of Christmas is a reminder – as well as an opportunity – to get your expectations of God aligned with who God really is – not what you want Him to be. We expect a tame God. But God is beyond your control or management. We expect a predictable God. But He delights in taking you for rides in life that can be downright scary to say the least. We expect a soft, comfortable God. But there is a kind of fierceness about our God. Frankly, He often delights in making you uncomfortable so you’ll become more like His Son, Jesus. So, Christmas is a great time for you and me to examine our expectations about God, about Jesus, about what it means to a follower of Jesus and then make some adjustments. Christmas is a constant reminder that God will do it His way and He could care less if He meets your expectations or not. There’s a final thought here. Christmas is a reminder that ...

### **GOD HAS EXPECTATIONS OF ME THAT I NEED TO MEET.**

This is God’s show from first to last. Isn’t that the deeper meaning of Christmas? He doesn’t exist to fulfill your plan. You exist to fulfill His plan. Ultimately, all people – every man, woman and child on this planet who has lived, is living, or will live – answer to Him. What do you expect? That’s an interesting question, but in the end not an important one. Here’s the one that matters: what does God expect of you? I think our passage points to some answers.

How does Jesus respond to John’s question? “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.” (Mt 11:5 NIV) Each one of those people in Jesus’ list needed to be fixed. Something was wrong in each life. And Jesus saw His role as doing the fixing. I hear in Jesus’ answer an expectation

that applies to you and me. It's as if God says to you and me, "I expect you to let Me fix you." Isn't that what God is saying every Christmas every year? "Just wanted to remind you.... You were so messed up, so broken and so desperate that I had to send Myself in the person of My Son, Jesus. I came to fix you and I expect you to cooperate."

My friend, you might not be blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead or poor today. But if you're like me, you need fixing somewhere. You might have an anger problem. You might be controlling and manipulative. You might worship money and the things money can buy. You might be a slave to lust. You might have problems telling the truth. You might be a racist. You might be withholding forgiveness from someone today. You might hate someone. You might care less about poor people. You might think spiritually lost people should all just go to hell. You might be addicted to drugs, alcohol, shopping, or success when God wants you to be addicted to Him. Am I the only one out there to whom God has to say constantly, "Rick, I love you, but this thing in your life needs to get fixed?" Christmas reminds us that God is always saying, "I expect you to let Me fix you."

How else does Jesus respond to John's question? He says, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Mt 11:6 NIV) Those words "fall away" are translated from the Greek word, "skandalizo", from which we get the word "scandal." Jesus is saying, in effect, "God bless the people who don't get offended by Me because of their wrong expectations of Me." I see an implied expectation in Jesus' words that apply to you and me. Isn't He saying, "I expect you to trust Me regardless?" A relationship with God is based on trust from first to last. When you first enter into a relationship with Jesus as your Lord and Savior, it's a trust thing. Instead of trusting in yourself to somehow get into Heaven on your own merits, you put your trust in Jesus and what He did for you.

But, then, after you've become a follower of Jesus, God wants you to continue to trust Him. If you're like me, that's where it can become a real challenge. He expects you to trust Him even when He doesn't do what you expect or want Him to do. He doesn't always heal the person you pray for. He doesn't always give you the job you want. He doesn't save every marriage. He doesn't restore every friendship. He'd doesn't remove the hard, difficult things that find their way into your life. He doesn't always give you your version of success in life. And so, if you're like me, you can get frustrated, angry and disappointed with God. What is that? At it's core, it's a lack of trust in God, isn't it? When we respond like that, we're saying, in effect, "God, You're not meeting my expectations. I don't know if I can really trust You with this situation."

I don't know how many times God has had to say to me, in effect, "Rick, I'm not here to meet Your expectations. I've already shown My love for you beyond any shadow of a doubt. Every Christmas is a reminder of that. Every Easter is a reminder of that. Every time you partake of Communion is a reminder of that. Now, I expect you to trust Me. I expect you to trust Me when you don't

understand Me or what I'm doing or allowing to happen. I expect you to trust Me when I seem hidden from you, trust Me when I seem silent and trust Me when I don't provide answers. I expect you to trust Me regardless."

Has God ever said something like that to you? Christmas is a constant reminder of how much God loves you and me. Every year at this time of year you should have your trust in God renewed through the Christmas celebration. And you need that because the fact is that your trust in God can start to wear thin and fray a bit throughout the rest of the year. Christmas is the ageless reminder that God loved you so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to die on a cross and rise again from the dead to pay the penalty for your sins and He has prepared a place in Heaven for you to live with Him for eternity. And because of Christmas God has the right to keep on saying to your much-in-need-of-fixing heart, "I expect you to trust Me regardless." Every year the celebration of Christmas reminds you that God is absolutely trustworthy.

The great missionary explorer, David Livingstone, served in Africa from 1840 until his death in 1873. David Livingstone was eager to travel into the uncharted lands of Central Africa to preach the gospel. On one occasion, he arrived on the edge of a territory that was ruled by a tribal chieftain. According to tradition, the chief would come out to meet him right there. Livingstone could go forward into the region only after an exchange was made. The chief would choose any item of Livingstone's personal property that caught his fancy and keep it for himself, while giving the missionary something of his own in return. Livingstone had few possessions with him, but he spread them all out on the ground—his clothes, his books, his watch, and even a goat that provided him with milk. Chronic stomach problems kept Livingstone from drinking the local water. To his dismay, the African chief took his goat. In return, the chief gave him a carved stick, shaped like a walking stick.

Livingstone was most disappointed. He began to gripe to God about what he viewed as a stupid walking cane. What could it do for him compared to the goat that kept him from getting sick? Then one of the local men explained, "That's not a walking cane. It's the king's very own scepter, and with it you will find entrance to every village in our country. The king has honored you greatly." The man was right. God opened Central Africa to Livingstone, and as successive evangelists followed him wave after wave of conversions to Jesus Christ occurred. That's the problem with expectations. Sometimes, in our disappointment over what we don't have, we fail to appreciate the significance of what God has given us.

Life with God is like that – full of surprises, full of the unexpected. Trust Him to do what is good. Trust Him to do what is right. Trust Him to do what's best for you in the end. Trust Him to bless your life above and beyond anything you could ever ask, think of or expect. Christmas is a yearly reminder that He already has and that He surely will again.