

Year A, Advent 3
Isaiah 35:1-10; Canticle 15
James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11
St. Catherine's Episcopal Church
December 11, 2016

This, our third week of Advent, is characterized by joy. It's sometimes called "gaudete" Sunday for the Latin word "to rejoice." Today we lit a pink candle. We hesitate for a moment on our four-week journey to Bethlehem to take a breath, to refresh ourselves along the way, and to breathe a sigh of relief that Jesus is almost here. Our readings today cry out for us to rejoice, not to be fearful, to trust in the Lord, to await his coming with joy! Then, we hear a whisper of doubt in our Gospel reading. John the Baptist is sitting in prison, and he probably sees the handwriting on that prison wall. Herod isn't happy with him. John has been railing against Herod for marrying his own brother's wife. John's in trouble. He's also been hearing the stories of Jesus' ministry. He's puzzled. He thought the Messiah was going to rise up and free the Jewish people from the oppressive Roman occupation. His expectations aren't being met. This is the man who leapt in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when he heard Mary's voice. This is the man who's gone before Jesus to proclaim the way. This is the man who's baptized Jesus in the River Jordan and recognized him as the one whose sandals he is unfit to untie. This is the man who's seen the Spirit descend on Jesus and heard the voice of God say, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." He's dedicated his life to going before Jesus, and now, as he sits in a prison cell, likely awaiting his own death, he has doubts.

When you were a child, did you ever doubt? Did you, for instance, ever doubt there was a Santa Claus? Shirley Temple has a story about the day her doubts were realized. "I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was 6. Mother took me to see him in a department store, and he asked for my autograph." Some of you have heard me tell my end-of-the-Santa-Claus-myth experience before. When I was six-years old, I asked Santa Claus for a new two-wheeled bike. I had long outgrown the one I had—the one that used to have training wheels. My knees hit the handlebars. Christmas morning dawned, and there was a bicycle under the tree. With great excitement, I rushed to see my newly prized possession, and then hesitated as I saw something unimaginable. The handlebars were painted with motley silver paint! These were no shiny chrome handlebars that I'd dreamed of! In a flash, I knew that this was a used bike that had been refurbished. That was the day I stopped believing in Santa Claus.

Life is like that isn't it? We set expectations for what's going to happen. We also set expectations for who people are. John the Baptist has done just that with Jesus. Last week we heard John saying that the Messiah was coming with a great winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff. That he'd be cutting down the unproductive trees with an axe, chopping out their roots and throwing the whole lot into the fire. This was the Messiah John expected. Instead of giving them fighting words, when John's disciples arrive asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers their question by inviting them to see what his ministry is really about. "...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." Hardly the stuff of which insurrections are made! Maybe, just maybe, this Messiah is showing

us a different kind of salvation than what John expected. Sometimes those expectations can get in the way.

Elizabeth Greene in “Is the Grinch stealing your Christmas?” writes of the way expectations can ruin the spirit of the season. She writes: “Many Grinches threaten to steal our joy and peace at Christmastime. We think we are buying just the right gift for someone, but it receives a cool reception. The rush of the season, long lines and slow traffic replace our joy with frustration. Some relatives try our patience. After the season passes, unmet expectations dampen our spirit, and the holiday blues move in. With the arrival of the new year, we are relieved the Christmas stress has passed instead of our being refreshed by the promise of Christ. More than we would like to admit, we allow the craziness of the Christmas season to be the Grinch that comes into our hearts to steal our joy.”

Our lofty expectations can show up to cloud many areas of our lives. Recently in Dallas, a “Husband Shopping Center” opened, where women could go to choose a husband from among many men. It was laid out with five floors, with the men increasing in positive attributes as you ascended up the floors. The only rules: Once you opened the door to any floor, you must choose a man from that floor, and if you went up a floor, you couldn’t go back down except to leave the place, never to return.

A couple of girlfriends went to the place to find men. On the first floor, the door had a sign saying, “These men have jobs and love kids.” The women read the sign and said, “Well, that’s better than not having jobs or not loving kids, but I wonder what’s farther up?” So up they went. The second floor said, “These men have high-paying jobs, love kids and are extremely good-looking.” “Hmm,” said the girls. “But I wonder what’s farther up?” The third floor: “These men have high-paying jobs, are extremely good-looking, love kids and help with the housework.” “Wow!” said the women. “Very tempting, BUT there’s more farther up!” And up they went. Fourth floor: “These men have high-paying jobs, love kids, are extremely good-looking, help with the housework and have a strong romantic streak.” “Oh, mercy! But just think what must be awaiting us farther on!” So up to the fifth floor they went. The sign on that floor said, “This floor is empty and exists only to prove that women are impossible to please.”

Expectations... Maybe the expectations we have aren’t the ones Jesus really came to tell us about. Maybe our dreams of chrome handlebars and department store Santas and superlative men or women are our own feeble expectations of how our world should be. Maybe we’re too short-sighted. Jesus’ vision is broader. If we allow him to break in on our self-centered expectations, and get over ourselves, we might see a bigger picture. Jesus said, “The blind receive their sight.” What would it be like if we invited those who are blind to Jesus to see a glimmer of his presence in us? Jesus said, “The lame walk.” What would it be like if we invited those who are lame and can’t walk a straight path to walk beside us? Jesus said, “The lepers are cleansed.” What would it be like if we invited the lepers in our society to come in out of the cold and have a warm meal? Jesus said, “The deaf hear.” What would it be like if we invited those who cannot hear the Word of God to see it in the way we live our lives? Jesus said, “The dead are raised.” What would it be like if we invited those whose souls are dead to know that new life

is available to them? Jesus said, “The poor have good news brought to them.” What would it be like if we invited those who are poor to rejoice with us at the Savior’s birth through our generosity?

This Advent time invites us to live fully in the present, not in our expectations for the future, but in the moment, ready to receive the one who comes. Kent Nerburn writes in *Small Graces* “Ours is a transient life, lived on the run, with an endless sense of process, of movement, of chasing the future. We seldom pause to shine a light upon the ordinary moments, to hallow them with our own attentiveness, to honor them with gentle caring. They pass unnoticed, lost in the ongoing rush of time.” Advent is a time to slow down and to quietly honor the ordinary moments—to make them holy.

Let us pray. Praise and honor to you living God; as we await your coming, let our pace slow. Let our hearts open and our minds still to welcome you. Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.