



Be released from the prison of expectations

Let's imagine the scene:

John yelled at his disciples, "The Messiah is doing what!?" His voice escaped between the bars of his cell and echoed throughout the prison. Maybe his disciples told him what Jesus was doing. Or maybe he overheard the guards talking about it. Maybe he found out from other visitors.

Jesus has been going throughout Galilee teaching and proclaiming the good news; healing the sick; telling the poor, those who mourn, the meek, and the merciful that they are blessed; touching and healing lepers; giving sight to the blind; making the paralysed walk; raising the dead.

"You've got to be kidding me," John snorted to his disciples. "Turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs from you, love your enemy? He actually said that?"

"No, this can't be. That's not who I baptized. That's not what I meant when I said he was the more powerful one. I was specific about that – axes, winnowing fork, and unquenchable fire. That's power."

"You go find him and tell him John wants to know, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

So maybe that's not exactly what today's gospel (Matthew 11:2-11) says, but what if it was? It could be. Maybe it didn't really happen like that but that's what I imagine is going on. It's what we might read if we were to read between the lines. While it is impossible to know exactly what John was thinking – I think the quandary that John was expressing, is one we have all heard in our own heart: Jesus! Why aren't you doing what I expected you to do?

We are a people of who have many expectations. When we go to bed at night, we expect the sun to rise in the morning. We expect others to stop at the stop sign. We expect it will take about an hour and a half to drive to Sydney. We expect the church to be open on Sundays, the lights on, and Holy Communion to be celebrated. We have expectations for what is appropriate behaviour for ourselves and others – especially the length of the message during church services!

Yes! We all have expectations because they offer some predictability and order to our world and lives. There are other expectations, however that affect us more profoundly than the day-to-day

expectations. Some of our expectations come from hope. But, at other times, we have expectations that come from fear. Surprisingly, both have the power to imprison us.

Expectations of hope create a framework for how we think the world and life should be. They are often the ideals and dreams that carry us forward. They, in some way, describe our world vision and what we want. But there are also expectations that arise from fear, about the things of life that we don't want to happen, or things we want to avoid. Whenever we talk about being worried about something, there is an underlying fearful expectation of something bad happening.

The thing about expectations is that they pull us out of the present moment into a future we do not yet have, except as it exists in our head. Pretty soon we begin to act and speak as if our expectations, either of hope or fear, are the reality of our lives. We allow those expectations to shape our attitudes, our beliefs, and the way we relate to others. Those expectations even shape our image of who God is and how God should act.

If God does not meet our expectations, we are usually a little too quick to question God, rather than ourselves. We trust our expectations of what God should be doing more than we trust what God is actually doing.

John the Baptist was a man of expectations. Last week we heard how John was a voice crying out in the wilderness, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." He was full of expectation of a new kingdom and a new ruler. He expected wrath, fire and axes. He expected one who would be more powerful – especially of the Romans. John's expectations gave him the confidence and ability to turn his back on the religious establishment, to go to the desert, and to seek God in the wild and arid places of life.

Today, the Gospel paints a very different picture of John. Today he is a prisoner with a question, "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?" So, what happened? How did John get from the vast wilderness expanse to the confines of four walls? How did he go from being a prophet with all the answers to a prisoner with questions?

At one level it started when he criticized King Herod. "It is not lawful," John said, "for you to have your [brother's wife]" (Matthew 14:1-4). So Herod arrested, bound, and imprisoned him. That's what happened in the physical realm, but God's Word always invites us to see and listen more deeply, to discern what's happening spiritually. King Herod may have put John in gaol, but it was John's own expectations that formed a prison around him. The dark solid walls and iron bars were an external symbol of the inner prison in which John now waited. He was confined by his own unmet expectations, a prison of disappointment and disillusion.

He has heard about all that the Christ, the Messiah, is doing ... but where is the axe? the fire? the winnowing fork? Where is the wrath amid cleansing lepers, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead? So, John sends a message, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" It's as if John is saying, "Are you sure you are the one! Because you sure aren't fitting my expectations."

He was imprisoned by his own expectations of who the Messiah is and how the Messiah should act. His vision of the kingdom was too small, his expectation of the Messiah too narrow. That is the danger we all fall into when we hold onto our expectations too tightly. Whether they are expectations of hope or expectations of fear, our expectations often blind us to the One who is coming, to the One who is more powerful. We imprison ourselves with a view of God, of Jesus, of the world, of our own lives ... that is too small, too narrow. We try to confine God's work and life to our expectations. But that is not who God is nor how God acts.

We wanted God to eliminate our suffering, instead we discovered God standing with us in the midst of our pain. We expected God to honour our righteous behaviour, but he called us to identify with the least, the smelliest, the rude and the wounded. We wanted him to make us strong, but he called us to discover his strength in our weakness. We hoped God would destroy our enemies, but he commanded us to love and bless them.

Every time one of our expectations is unmet our prison door gets blown open. Leaving us to decide: will we escape or simply pull the door closed again? It would be so much easier if Jesus would just come, do, and be as we expect. But he won't. He won't leave us in our cells no matter how comfortable or safe they might seem to us. He loves us too much.

There is a part of us, however, that persists with our expectations and our questioning. "Jesus just tell us. Are you the One who is coming, or we should wait for another? Just answer the question Jesus!" But, He does not do that for us or for John.

A simple 'yes' or 'no' answer will not release us from our prison. We will escape only when we let go of our expectations. We will escape when we open our minds and hearts to the bigger kingdom. We will escape when we trust God more than our ideas about God. The Season of Advent is the season for escaping from our expectations of God.

So I wonder, where have you imprisoned yourself with expectations of hope or fear? In what ways do you hold your prison door shut? How have you isolated yourself from the love, healing, and life Jesus offers? Today let us see that the door of our prison is locked, but only from the inside.

So, let's open the door and flee the confines of our expectations. A new world awaits you. What will you see and hear? Let us have eyes that see Jesus give sight to the blind, strength to the weak, the sick healed, and the poor hear the good news. Then we too will be amongst the captives whom Jesus has set free.

Advent Prayer Devotional

In this Advent season, we'll be sharing this story together—the story of how Jesus, our Savior, came into this world to save us. Together we'll celebrate how God kept His promise: "For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).w

