Gaudete

11 December, Anno Domini 2016

St. Matthew 11:2-11

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This time of year, we are always filled with expectations. Children are eagerly anticipating what mysterious joys lie concealed underneath paper and bows. Retailers expect huge crowds and huge profits. Adults expect a lot of anxious work and running around. For many their hearts are weighed down with expectations of sadness because this will be the first Christmas without their departed loved one or because they are expecting that very soon they will be mourning.

Expectations are fickle things, aren’t they? It doesn’t take much to cast us from the heights of joy to the darkest pits of despair and sadness. Who doesn’t have a vision of how life SHOULD go or at least how they would LIKE their life to play out? And who among us hasn’t lamented that things didn’t turn out as we had hoped? I recently learned that a good friend and seminary classmate of mine went in to a clinic because he thought he had a cold he couldn’t shake. He expected some antibiotics and a bill. Instead, he found out he has an incurable cancer. How many marriages that began in joyful expectations of happily ever after end in bitterness and divorce because one spouse didn’t meet the other’s expectations? How many parents find themselves completely confused about how their precious child who seemed to have such a bright future ahead of themselves, wandered so far from the right path? To be sure, it works the other way as well. When all hope seems lost and unexpected help is given. Family relations are brought back to life over the death bed. Sadness is turned to elation.

Expectations at the time of John the Baptist were running high. The Romans had long ruled over the Jews in Israel and several failed attempts had been made to gain freedom. And in the midst of that Zechariah walked out of the temple unable to speak. Nine months later he burst into song, singing the Benedictus, declaring to his infant son “And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways…”. And John’s preaching and way of life certainly didn’t help the situation. As St. Luke writes “As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ…” Finally, after 400 years of silence, another prophet! John played the part well. He was certainly unconventional. He was a fire-brand preacher. He wasn’t afraid to stand up to the religious elites. He baptized. He preached about judgment and trees getting hacked down and burned up in the fire. He spoke the Word of God with great power and authority. Is it any wonder people thought John was the Christ?

But the expectations were misguided, as our expectations so often are. John wasn’t the Messiah we need (and he never billed himself that way). The problem is in our expectation, the kind of Messiah we want and think we need. This was true even of John’s own disciples. They hung on his every word. They believed. But they couldn’t let go of John. Even though John had very clearly pointed to Jesus and said “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” In other words, “Look, there is the Messiah, the Lord whose way I prepare. Everything I have preached is fulfilled in Him. The whole purpose of my existence is to make Jesus known to you as the Christ. That is why I baptized Him, not because He needed repentance but so that you might know Him, so that you might leave me and be His disciples.” You might say John was working himself out of job. You don’t need the best man when the Bridegroom is here. Or, as John himself put it, “He must increase and I must decrease.”

We want a Messiah. We want to be saved. But most of the time we don’t really understand what we need to be saved from. So often we are looking for someone to rescue us from our suffering, to make our lives at least a little easier. We want someone to stop the pain. We want someone to take away the dementia and miraculously drive the cancer into remission. We want someone to show us how to live happier, more self-controlled lives. We want someone to come and make things better. I think the political circus we’re in the midst of is proof positive that everyone is looking for someone who will take charge and fix things. How do politicians get elected? They make promises. They convince us that they know what to do to make our situation better. Look at President-elect Trump. He was loud. He simply said what was on his mind. He promised to make the country great again. His follies and failings were basically irrelevant. People wanted someone who they believed was going to look out for them and stop those who they felt were running roughshod over them. That’s a savior we can get behind. That’s the kind of messiah we want. We want him to look and dress and speak and act the part. We want someone who will sweep us up and carry us to safety - or at least promise to.

That’s what people were so desperately hoping for in John’s day. Is it any wonder then, that they struggled to follow John’s pointing to Jesus? What kind of a savior was he? He wasn’t that impressive. He wasn’t nearly as intimidating as John. What could he offer? What could He possibly save us from? Why, if Jesus was the Messiah, didn’t He free John, His own forerunner, from prison? If John had been faithful and done his appointed job, why didn’t Jesus swoop in and save his head from Herod’s sword? What kind of a Savior doesn’t save from that?

How often we have found ourselves wondering the exact same thing. What could Jesus offer me? Is He really the kind of Savior I’m looking for or should I look for another? Well, that depends. What did you come out here today to see? Did you come looking for a Savior who does little more than make you comfortable? Did you come looking for a Savior who arrays Himself in great power and splendor? Did you come looking for a Savior who really just wants you to save yourself? Did you come looking for a Savior who will pat you on the back and tell you how good you are. Repent. You won’t find that Savior here.

Do you, oh sinner, clothed in the filth and stench of your bitter words and self-promoting dreams really want God to appear to you in all His glory and might? Do you want the God of Mt. Sinai? Behold, instead, the God who comes to you clothed in great weakness and humility, wearing not the majestic robes of heaven, but the very same flesh that you bear. He wants sinners to draw near to Him, not run from Him. Do you, oh sinner, crushed to the ground under the righteous demands of the Law really want a Savior who does little more than drive you more feverishly into despair and hopelessness by demanding even greater acts of love and devotion to God? Behold, instead, the Savior who doesn’t just encourage you but who actually takes the terrible load of your guilt and bears it for you, allowing Himself to be crushed in your place. Do you want the Savior who grants you a few moments of reprieve in this world only to leave you terrified in the face of death because your sin remains your own? Behold, instead, the Christ who called forth the dead from the tomb, who poured out Blood and water from His pierced side, who laid in your grave, who marched victorious from the streets of Satan’s kingdom, who now sits enthroned at God the Father’s hand so that the very gates of eternal life are opened to you and to all who believe on His Name.

There is only one Christ, one Savior. And it is the Savior whom the prophets of old have long pointed to. Jesus, the Son of Mary, God of God. He who is the greatest made Himself the least in God’s kingdom so that you might be exalted. John was great to be sure. But he too needed a Savior. He couldn’t save himself nor could he save anyone else. But Jesus can and does. He is exactly the Savior that each and every one of us needs. He is the Savior who binds up the brokenhearted. He is the Savior who doesn’t snuff out smoldering wicks or break bruised reeds. He is the God of the weak, the struggling, the weeping, the addicted, the depressed, the overwhelmed, the abandoned. He is the Savior who lays quietly in the arms of His mother serenaded by cattle and sheep. He is the Savior who wages war against your ancient and bitter enemies of sin and death, enemies that you are powerless to stop. He is the Savior who grants to you the Holy Spirit of God so that you may put away the works of darkness, crucify the desires of the flesh and walk, instead, in newness of life, bringing glory to the Name of God and showing mercy to the weak and hurting in your midst.

Do not expect another or a different Savior. You won’t find one. And do not be offended by the Jesus who came in weakness and poverty because it is your weakness and poverty to which He came. Instead, expect Jesus to point your terrified and battered soul to the font where you were promised a kingdom and drawn into the life of the Triune God. Expect peace and hope as He feeds you with the very Body and Blood which He offered to set you free. Expect the freedom of a the absolved conscience no longer bound to face the righteous wrath of God. Expect the peace of God which passes all human understanding.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.