

December 11, 2022  
Third Sunday of Advent  
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

This past Wednesday, I joined people of faith from all over the state, including a good crew of folks from St. Bart's, at the State House in Augusta for a prayer vigil and public witness to raise awareness and express concern at the looming homelessness crisis for those in our state who have been supported by the emergency rental assistance program

This program is set to terminate this month and without additional funds or affordable housing options, many of our most vulnerable neighbors are facing homelessness just as we embark on the coldest season in our region

The vigil was held the same day that the new legislators were being sworn-in, so it was a busy building

There was an air of hope, possibility, and dare I even say excitement as both we and the new representatives and senators walked the halls – it felt like we were on the cusp of something new!

And we are – both locally and nationally, we are preparing for yet another peaceful transition of power as those who lost step down and those who won will step into their new positions

All that they hoped to accomplish is now on the cusp of being possible, and all that we who voted for them believed them to accomplish will now have a chance to play out

Will the reality meet our expectations? Will it exceed them? Or will we be disappointed?

We must wait and see

“Anticipation” – that’s the theme of our midweek Advent services and that’s where we find ourselves yet again today: anticipating

This narrative of “will our expectations be met” plays out in so many ways in our lives – a new job or a new employee – will the job description match the reality, will their resume come to life?

Going on a date for the first time – will they be as sweet as their online dating profile made them sound?

Heck, even buying a new refrigerator! Will it actually fit that whole birthday cake as it advertised?

The anticipation, the wonder, the hope – the possibility for great joy and great disappointment right in the same moment

This is precisely where we find ourselves in Advent, too, with the promise of a messiah and the advent of his coming at Christmas

And, this is precisely where John the Baptist finds himself in our gospel for today

Last week, you heard John in his prime: in the wilderness, wearing camel skins and eating bugs all while baptizing people in the river as a symbol of cleansing them of their sinfulness

John was the one who was to “prepare the way” (Isaiah 40:3) as the prophet Isaiah predicted

And John told people “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me” (Matthew 3:11)

Now, John finds himself in prison for critiquing the Roman leader and he is hearing stories from his followers about Jesus and so he sends Jesus a

message: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”  
(Matthew 11:3)

Can you hear the hope in his words? The anticipation?

“Is it you? Should we invest our time in you or should we look to someone else? I’ve done all I can do to prepare the way, I’ve put my life on the line for the messiah, is it you?”

And Jesus’ response? “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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (Matthew 11:4-6)

Do you think John’s concerns were alleviated by Jesus’ response?

From our perspective, we might want to be like: “duh, John, Jesus is the Messiah!”

But, remember, John and so many of his contemporaries were anticipating something specific – something along the lines of a great warrior, a magnificent politician, a prince!

Jesus points to healing and preaching good news

I’m not sure Jesus’ response nor his actions would match the job description John had in mind

As Stanley Saunders from Columbia Theological Seminary puts it: “Jesus’ ministry was strong on healing and restoration but weak on judgment and vindication.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-112-11-6>

You and I might say, “that’s good!” – but, John might say “that’s not exactly what I had in mind”

John has heard his whole life the predictions of the Messiah from the prophets like Isaiah who, last week you heard, predicted “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4) and this week “He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” (Isaiah 35:4)

In this context, you could see how John might have had slightly different expectations

Perhaps here is where faith enters this story

Could John be disappointed and Jesus actually *be* the Messiah

Could Jesus’ actions actually be the fulfillment of exactly those prophecies just in way John didn’t anticipate

Is it understandable that John might experience some doubt and frustration when he has staked his life on a certain cause, and to not feel like he’s seeing it come to fruition even though people are saying this is the Messiah

We are a lot like John, and we often share in his doubt

We look for signs and assurances that our faith is put in the right place

We, like John, sometimes wish that God was a *little* more involved in the world and would help us more directly end the injustices that seem to plague our communities generation after generation

We often wish that God would make a big splash instead of a little ripple

And, amidst our doubt and our searching, our longing, our anticipation –  
Jesus comes

And, as Dr. Matt Skinner from Luther Seminary asks, what if the evidence of Jesus being active in the world isn't grandiose, but still real?<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps we, like John, have big expectations, big hopes, for seeing God in the world, big anticipation that Jesus active in the world will mean radical change immediately – and, while I don't want to quell that hope and that possibility, perhaps the real presence of God is more in the subtleties of life

Debie Thomas writes, “We glimpse Jesus’ reality in shadows. We hear it in whispers. It comes to us by stealth, with subtlety, over long, quiet stretches of time.”<sup>3</sup>

It's not that we should dampen our expectations, it's that we maybe need to think about where we're looking and what we're expecting the proof of God's presence to look like today: not a burning bush, but a Christmas tree with ornaments filled with memories; not commandments written on tablets, but Christmas cards sent with well wishes and updates from loved ones; not a politician or king on a throne, but a baby born in a manger.

This third Sunday in Lent is called “Gaudete Sunday” or “Rejoice Sunday” – it is a slight lift in the penitential season of Advent and it is meant to offer us all a moment, in the midst of the anticipation and preparation, to rejoice at all the ways, small and large, God has been present in our lives

There's a prayer that I love from Dag Hammarskjöld that I think captures this Sunday well, it goes like this:

For all that has been, thank you.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/advent-perception>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3509>

For all that is to come, yes!<sup>4</sup>

On this Gaudete Sunday, we say “thank you” for your subtle presence in our lives, God.

And, with great anticipation for what continues to be possible in your coming into our lives yet again, we say “yes!”

Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35474-for-all-that-has-been-thank-you-for-all-that>