

Awaiting the Unexpected Messiah

This morning's sermon is a little less polished than usual. For that, I apologize and ask your forgiveness. Something unexpected has happened, and the message I put together a couple of days ago simply wouldn't do. If you'd like to read it, we'll post it on the website later.

This is an especially complex and emotional day in the life of our parish family. Yesterday, we bade farewell to a stalwart friend of the food pantry, Lawrence Coleman. Lawrence had been ill for some time, so his passing wasn't unexpected. Nonetheless, when someone who has been a good friend moves beyond our sight, we come together and we grieve. The sanctuary was filled with Lawrence's family and friends yesterday, many of whom had come considerable distances to be here. Even as we mourned, we celebrated his life, and it was a beautiful thing.

By now, you likely will have learned that our dear friend Dawn Moorehead has also passed away. Unlike Lawrence, Dawn was in good health, enjoying her life and looking forward to an active retirement. She was the victim of an accident, so her passing was completely unexpected. In fact, it was a shock.

Today was supposed to be entirely devoted to celebration. Our dear friend Alice Hall who, with her daughter Anne, lit our Advent candles this morning, is moving to Idaho. She'll be living right across the street from Anne's workplace, surrounded by her loving family. We'll continue to see Alice on Zoom, and she'll be back from time to time to visit. Our plan had been to give her a joyous celebration. Dawn's sudden passing makes that more difficult. Do we grieve for Dawn, and for Lawrence? Do we rejoice for Alice, even as we know we'll miss her terribly? What are we to do with so many conflicting feelings?

Today's Gospel raises similar questions. Last week, we saw John the Baptist baptizing people into repentance with water, preparing the way for a Messiah whom he expected to follow him, baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He warned the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him that, unless they renounced their prideful ways, the coming Messiah would punish them in unquenchable flames.

Today's passage skips nine chapters ahead in Matthew's Gospel. John has had plenty of time to watch Jesus at work. We find him not on the banks of the Jordan River, but in King Herod's prison, awaiting his execution. But John doesn't seem especially concerned about his own fate. Whatever he has heard about what Jesus is doing has made John wonder whether he made a mistake. Unable to confront Jesus himself, John sends messengers to ask him, "Are you the one that is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus isn't what John expected, and the Baptist isn't especially pleased.

Jesus's reply is mild enough, but there's steel beneath it. He asks the messengers to tell John about the many healing miracles he has performed, a not-so-subtle reminder that the Hebrew prophecies promised more than just retribution against Israel's oppressors. Then, Jesus says, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." It's not quite an order to back off, but it suggests that Jesus isn't especially troubled by John's disappointment. Although he thinks highly of John, Jesus's priorities are different than John's, and they don't involve dispensing fiery payback to the Sanhedrin, King Herod or Rome.

We can sympathize with John. The Hebrew people had been waiting for generations for a warrior king, the Messiah who would rescue them once and for all from the many secular powers that had oppressed them for so long. From their slavery in Egypt through the Babylonian Exile to the Roman occupation, the Hebrew people had really been through the mill. They wanted their

own powerful hero, someone strong enough to triumph over the worldly might of Rome and corruption in the Temple leadership. Instead, they got a wandering rabbi who liked to preach and tell stories, who meandered from town to town seemingly without direction, and who always seemed to be at one dinner party or another, periodically stirring up the local Pharisees but hardly giving John's suffering people much reason to hope for liberation. Jesus was not at all what John had expected. The Baptist had plenty of reason for conflicting emotions.

Modern Christians have an advantage that John did not. We know what happened next. Jesus didn't liberate the Hebrew people from Rome. Quite the contrary – Jesus was taken into custody by the Roman governor and crucified with the collaboration of the Temple authorities. But that seemingly tragic event was the catalyst for the greatest miracle that the world has ever seen. The warrior Messiah whom John expected would have saved Israel, for a season. Jesus, the unexpected Messiah, liberated all of humankind from spiritual oppression, and for all time. He wasn't what John and the prophets expected, and thank God for it. Jesus was much, much more.

You may have noticed that the third candle that Alice and Anne lit this morning is a different color than the others. This is Gaudete Sunday, one of two days on our liturgical calendar when we use the color rose – not pink – to signify joyful anticipation. Gaudete is a Latin word that means “rejoice jubilantly.” This Sunday, we are to rejoice as we wait for Jesus to return.

Gaudete Sunday is also a day to honor Mary, the peasant girl who found herself suddenly pregnant by the Holy Spirit, who gave birth to the Son of God in all of his divine humanity. What could be more unexpected than that? Mary's pregnancy threatened her engagement, her reputation, even her life. Yet, as we hear in the song Mary sang to her cousin Elizabeth, the elderly woman who gave birth to John the Baptist, Mary knew how to rejoice. We can't know

how much Mary understood at this point about how her son would change the world, or about how much she would suffer watching him do it. But we can hear in her canticle that she trusted God to make things right, to uplift the lowly and humble the wicked, to fill the poor with good things while sending the undeservingly wealthy away empty. Mary knew that our God overturns our expectations, blessing us with hope to lighten our mixed emotions when life turns out differently than we planned.

If your emotions are complicated right now, you're not alone. Dawn was supposed to be with us this morning, and I'm heartbroken that she isn't. I rejoice that Alice has been such a blessing to St. Luke's, and I'm delighted that she's moving to where she'll be safe and surrounded by her loved ones. I'm also really going to miss her. And, while I only knew her for a few months, I'm confident that dear, sweet, generous Dawn would be the first to wish Alice well, and to want all of us to give Alice the joyful, hopeful celebration that she deserves.

Life is filled with unexpected events, and they don't always bring us reason to rejoice. But maybe God hopes that we'll rejoice anyway, as Mary did, recognizing that the love we have for one another is reason enough to celebrate jubilantly even in the face of unexpected events that break our hearts. Alice, we love you, we're so grateful for you, we're going to miss you like crazy, and we're so glad that you'll still be only one Zoom screen away.

There are only two weeks left until Christmas, two more weeks to wait for Jesus to return. When he does, I have no doubt that it won't be like anything we've expected. It will be better, because that's what Jesus does. My prayer for each and every one of you is that, sometime in these next two weeks, God will bless you with something unexpected, something that surprises you, delights you, and fills your heart with joy. Jesus is coming – Gaudete. Gaudete. *Amen.*