

The Unexpected

December 11, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

One Christmas before Christine and I were engaged, I had spent some time at the local jeweler's looking over rings for when I would "pop the question." While I was there I noticed that they had a number of beautiful Christmas ornaments on display. What a nice present that would be, I thought, to give my future wife (if she said, "yes") as a treasure to be remembered. What I was not expecting was her reaction to getting that present. We were gathered around her parent's Christmas tree when she unwrapped her present which I had kept in the box that it came in, a box that had displayed quite obviously the name of the local jeweler on it. She held that box in her hand for longer than I thought was necessary and then looked up to see her looking at me with a "You didn't do what I think you are doing, are you, in front of my parents" look. Her "look" startled me just as much as she was startled by receiving a box from the jeweler's in front of everybody. When she finally did open the gift, and find out that it was an ornament and not what she was expecting, I think her face changed from a sense of relief to a look of "just what are you playing at"? At any rate, it's still an ornament we put

on the Christmas tree every year, and cannot help but reflect a little bit on that exchange that day. Just so you know, I did get her permission to share this story.

Now, I have heard people tell me that they don't like surprises. I know, sometimes surprises could get us into trouble. But always getting only what you expect all the time would be boring. Facing the unexpected helps add spice to life and sometimes brings insight that we otherwise would not have.

Jesus, for one, was not what most people expected. People like to fit Jesus into a box of their own making, and when he doesn't fit or live up to their expectations, then they have questions. Some were offended by Jesus. Some got angry with Jesus. Some were even plotting to kill Jesus, because he wasn't what they expected. Even John the Baptist asked a question about Jesus because Jesus wasn't acting like the Messiah he expected. "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Speaking of surprises, this response from John the Baptist surprises us. John, how could you question whether Jesus was the one or not? Aren't you the same John the Baptist who knew Jesus was the one since you were in the womb? When the Virgin Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and her baby, who was to be known as John the Baptist, leapt in her womb (Luke 1:41). John was Jesus' relative. Didn't he know who Jesus truly was some thirty years after that prophetic leap in the womb?

The Scriptures don't tell us why John asked that question about Jesus. We can only speculate on why he questioned whether or not Jesus was the one he had expected. For one, we can only imagine the situation that John was in that would lend itself to a sense of hopelessness. John was in prison. Prisons were not the luxurious prisons we have today, where the inmates had a cot, a toilet, and food delivered to them on a regular basis. It was dark, damp, cell where they would be chained to the wall and possibly to the floor as well, slowly starving to death, and living in their own filth and with vermin crawling all over. It was the kind of environment that did not lend itself to positive thinking.

Secondly, what John the Baptist was likely expecting was someone like himself: a man who was filled with passion, fire, and divine wrath. A person who was not afraid to point out other people's faults and call them sinners who stood in need of repentance. That was the kind of person John was and he went so far as to point out the king's faults, regardless of what the consequences may be. The king had married his brother's divorced wife, and that was an abomination as far as John was concerned and he told the king so. That was what landed him in prison in the first place. And if John the Baptist was that kind of person, John expected that the Messiah was going to be even tougher on sinners. John had proclaimed, *"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he*

will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:10-12).

Yet what had Jesus done so far? He had:

preached a sermon on the mount (Matt. chapters 5-7),
performed miracles (Matt. 8:1-13),
healed people (Matt. 8:14-17),
called disciples (Matt. 8:18-22),
calmed a storm (Matt. 8:23-27),
sent demons into a herd of pigs (Matt. 8:28-34),
healed a paralyzed man (Matt. 9:1-8),
ate with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9-13),
talked to religious leaders about fasting (Matt. 9:14-17),
healed a bleeding woman, restored a girl to life, healed a blind and mute man (Matt. 9:18-34),
urged the disciples to pray for workers of the harvest (Matt. 9:35-38),
and sent out his disciples and prepared them for persecution (Matt. 10).

Not exactly the fiery sword of judgement that John had expected. At least not so far. So, is Jesus the one that John had been preparing the way for or should he expect another? Jesus responded by saying he was doing all the things that were prophesied that the Messiah would be doing according to Isaiah (35:4-6; 61:1): *The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.* And yes, there were people who didn't understand, and even some who were offended by what Jesus was doing. So, Jesus sends also a word of encouragement to John: *Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.*

So, should we think any less of John the Baptist for his willingness to question and to have doubts, because Jesus wasn't what he had expected? No, according to Jesus, for John the Baptist was the greatest of anyone born of a woman. Speaking of expectations, what did the people expect from John the Baptist when they had gone out to see him? Did they see a reed swayed by the wind? No, John was firm in his convictions. Did they go to see a man dressed in fine clothes? No, John was dressed in camel hair and a leather belt. Did that make him any less of a person? Not hardly. John was a prophet. Yes, John was more than a prophet. John was a great man, but even the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he.

At one church we had a Bible study in our home. I noticed that one of the young ladies who came to the Bible study would hardly say a thing. When I approached her in private about that she responded to me that she had always been taught that she should not question. It was as if by asking a question that she was questioning the existence of God. My friends, the only way we can learn is by asking questions. Even John the Baptist, the greatest of those born among women, had questions. How much more so can we ask questions without fear of repercussions. I have been a pastor for 35 years and I still have questions. So I read some more, study some

more, and go in search of the answers to my questions. That is what has helped me to become more mature in my faith and my understanding of God and the things of God. Our God is greater than any questions we might have of him. And there is not a question you can ask of God that someone else hasn't already thought of and has likely written an article or book about it.

The more dangerous thing to do is to try to put Jesus into a box of our own making, believing we of such finite minds could ever fully understand him. Our God is the awesome God. Our God constantly surprises us with his amazing grace. One of things that make God so much fun to get to know is that he does the unexpected. His surprises are always good surprises and we receive so much more than we could ever expect or anticipate.