

*IS GOD A STEELERS FAN?*  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "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."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

What happens when our expectations don't get met? And what happens when it's God who doesn't meet them?

Years ago, the Buffalo Bills had a wide receiver named Steve Johnson. Some of you might remember him. He was a good player, but one time, during a game against Pittsburgh, he dropped what would've been a game-winning pass during overtime, and the Bills ended up losing 16-13. It was a tough loss, and afterwards Johnson went on Twitter and angrily blamed God. This is what he tweeted: "I praise you 24/7!!! And this is how you do me!!! You expect me to learn from this??? How??? I'll never forget this!! Ever!! Thx Tho."

So what happens when God doesn't meet our expectations? The same thing that happens when anyone doesn't meet our expectations. We take it personally. We get upset. We feel let down. We lash out. But with God, there's often an extra layer of doubt and fear and confusion. It pulls the rug out from under us theologically.

Apparently Johnson thought he had an arrangement with God: He showers God with praise, and in exchange God helps him win football games. But when he dropped that ball, and his team lost the game, all that went out the window, and there were only two possibilities, neither of which was very comforting. Either God hadn't held up God's end of the bargain, which means God is unreliable, and we can't count on God for anything. Or there was never any bargain to begin with, which means our relationship with God is not transactional.

We don't offer God something and get something back in return.

And I guess there is a third possibility, but it was probably too painful for Johnson to even think about: Maybe God just doesn't like the Bills; maybe God is a Steelers fan. That said, let's turn our attention now to John the Baptist.

Last week, we heard John crying out in the wilderness, telling people they needed to shape up because the kingdom of heaven was near. And what struck me about that story was how certain he was about what he was saying. There wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind that a new day of justice was right around the corner, and when it got here, all would be made right with the world. The tables would be turned on the rich, and the burdens of the poor would be lifted. The plans of the proud would be scattered, and the humble would be exalted. Tyrants would be cast down from their thrones, and the lowly would be looked upon with favor. The hands of the greedy would be emptied, and the hungry would be filled with good things.

In fact, John was so sure all this was about to happen he didn't care about making enemies. When a group of powerful men from the temple in Jerusalem came poking around, instead of toning it down, he called them a "brood of vipers," and he told them their days were numbered. The Messiah's coming, he warned them, and when he gets here he's going set things straight. He's going to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff he's going to burn "with unquenchable fire."

Well, that was the John the Baptist we heard last week. This week the John we hear sounds like a completely different person. Gone is all the certainty, all the confidence, all the swagger, and what's left are lots of doubts and questions. We find John this morning, not out the wilderness, but sitting in jail. His outspokenness has finally gotten him in trouble with the king. And while he's locked up he's getting reports about Jesus, and he doesn't like what he's hearing. Instead of stirring up the masses, Jesus is going around healing people. Instead of starting a rebellion, Jesus is preaching about love and forgiveness.

John's not on Twitter, but if he was he'd probably be sending Jesus angry tweets right now, with lots of punctuation. What he does instead is send some of his followers to go find Jesus and ask him, *Are you the guy or not? Are you the Messiah, or should we be waiting for someone else—someone who won't disappoint us; someone who will meet our expectations?*

I feel sorry for John. The movement he's been preparing the way for hasn't materialized, the change he saw coming doesn't seem to be happening, and now he's afraid he might have been wrong about Jesus. He might not be the Messiah after all. It's a little bit like when we take a chance and try something new in the church because we think it's what God is calling us to do. But things don't work out the way we planned, the effort seemingly fails, and we start wondering if the whole thing was a big mistake, which is a shame because maybe it's not that we were wrong about what God wanted us to do. Maybe it's just that God is working through us in ways we can't perceive for reasons we can't grasp.

Maybe it's just that God has a longer view and a wider perspective.

Certainly that was the case with John.

When his followers catch up with Jesus and ask if he's the guy, Jesus doesn't give them a simple *yes* or *no* answer. He says, *Go tell John what you see happening, and let him decide for himself*: "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"—which is very much like what Isaiah said would happen when God came to save God's people.

So it turns out that John's first instinct was correct. Jesus is the Messiah. He's just not the kind of Messiah John thought Israel was going to get. He thought the Messiah would have an army, and he'd overthrow the political system, and justice would come quickly by force. But Jesus isn't bringing political change. He's bringing human change. He isn't bringing change to the center. He's bringing change to the margins. He isn't bringing change that will only last until the next empire comes along. He's bringing change that will last forever. And that kind of change doesn't happen overnight. It happens slowly, and it's hard to see, and sometimes you wonder if it's happening at all. Unless you have a long view and a wider perspective. Unless you let go of your expectations and see things the way Jesus does—not at the level of society as a whole but at the level of the individual human heart.

So is God a Steelers fan? Of course! That's not even a question. What else would God be? But that's not the most important thing to take away from Steve Johnson and his angry tweet, and it's not

the most important thing to take away from John the Baptist and his questioning of Jesus' actions.

Sometimes God doesn't do what we want God to do, and we feel hurt and confused. Sometimes God doesn't seem to be doing anything, and we wonder if God's even there. But God is always working to bring about God's purposes in God's time, whether we perceive it or not. God's kingdom is always unfolding. And the challenge for us as people of faith is to put our trust in God, and not lose hope, and live as though a new day of justice really is right around the corner. Blessed is anyone, Jesus said, who lives their life that way. Amen.