

LETTING GO OF OUR EXPECTATIONS

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Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

There's a feeling of anticipation that builds the closer we get to Christmas—a sense that something good is coming, and it's right around the corner—and with only a week left to go, the readings this morning really crank it up a notch.

In the first reading, Isaiah brings good news to the oppressed. The captives will all be freed. The prisoners will all be released. Everyone who mourns will be comforted. And righteousness will spring up before all the nations. In the second reading, John the Baptist tells the religious authorities from Jerusalem that the person he's been out there in the desert witnessing to has already arrived. They don't know who he is, but he's already standing among them.

God is breaking into the world. A new day is dawning. And all we have to do is

open our eyes and look around to see it. That's the message we hear a week out from Christmas, and we're starting to feel the excitement. At the same time, however, we're starting to form expectations, and that's something we have to be careful of.

Anytime we look forward to something, we can't help thinking about what it's going to be like, and we can't help forming an image in our minds—how a meal is going to taste after we spend all day in the kitchen; what our old classmates are going to be like when we go to our high school reunion. But oftentimes we're surprised. The images we conjured up don't always match the reality. The pot roast we thought was going to be so juicy and delicious turns out to be a little dry. The kid who flunked biology became a brain surgeon.

When things like that happen, the logical thing to do is to let go of our expectations. But sometimes that's easier said than done. Sometimes we can't see past them. Maybe because we have a lot of emotion invested in them. Maybe because they've become part of our identity—part of who we are. Maybe because we've held them for so long we don't even know they're there.

Whatever the reason, sometimes we cling to our expectations, even when they're not accurate, even when experience proves them wrong. And I think we have to watch out for that especially when it comes to our faith because our expectations of God, even if they're not necessarily wrong, still have a way of limiting our understanding of God. They can become blinders. They can narrow our vision and keep us from seeing other possibilities. They can make us think that the little bit we know about God is all there is to know, when in fact we've barely scratched the surface.

We have lots of expectations when it comes to God—lots of ideas about who God is and what God is like. And right now, during Advent, when we're waiting for the birth of Jesus, it's a good time to think about all the ideas we have specifically about him. We see him as a savior. We see him as a healer. We see him as a revolutionary. We see him as a teacher. We see him as a friend. And beyond all those biblical images, we project all kinds of things on to him that really have more to do with us. We see him as a Presbyterian or a Pentecostal, a Methodist or a Mormon, depending on what church we belong to. We see him as a liberal or a conservative, a Democrat or a Republican, depending on our politics. We picture him with blond hair and blue eyes and European features, even though he was Middle Eastern. We see him in all these different ways, some accurate, some not. But do we ever really see him, or like the priests and the

Levites in the reading, does he stand among us as one we do not know?

At best, I think what we see are facets of Jesus. But we can never grasp the whole reality. We can never exhaust the mystery of God made flesh, the divine and the human coming together. And that's what I love about the gospel reading this morning. It reminds us how deep this mystery really is by not conforming to any of our expectations.

This is basically John's version of the Christmas story—the story of how Jesus came into the world. But it's not the story we're used to. John gives it a much more cosmic spin. We don't see any of the usual elements: the inn with a no vacancy sign out front; the shepherds out in the fields at night; the star rising in the west; the wise men bearing gifts. We don't see any of that. There's not even a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. All we have is light. We also don't hear any of the usual titles for Jesus. Lord, Son of God, Son of David, Son of Man—none of them are used. Jesus is only referred to as "the one." Even John the Baptist isn't John the Baptist. He's just plain old John. And he doesn't say much about who he is. He only says who he's not. He's not the Messiah. He's not Elijah. He's not the prophet-like-Moses that Israel has been waiting for. He's just a voice crying out in the wilderness.

So there's nothing familiar to grab on to. This is not the Christmas story we expect. And that's not a bad thing because it challenges any notion we might have that we know all there is to know about Jesus—who he is and what he's like, what he'd have to say about things today, where he'd worship on Sunday morning, who he'd vote for in the next election. It's almost as if John is saying, You think you've got him pegged. You think he fits in this little box or that little box. But there's a mystery here that

you'll never get to the bottom of. There's a reality here that you'll never fully know.

Personally, I'm glad about that. It means there's always more for me to discover about God. It means there's always the chance that God will come into my life in ways I don't expect. It means there's always room for God to surprise me.

The other day I was talking to my wife, and she said she thinks Advent is not quite as fulfilling as other seasons of the year because there's all this talk about preparing the way of the Lord, but there's very little talk about how we actually do that. So I thought, Well, maybe we can start by naming our expectations. How do we see Jesus? What do we think his life was about? Where do we look for him in our own lives?

And then maybe we can work on letting those expectations go—or at least holding on to them a little more lightly. Not that we can't enjoy all the things we love about Christmas. We just have to remember that Christmas isn't something that started in the little town of Bethlehem, and it's not something that only a few people were there to witness. It's much, much more than that. It's something that started when the world began, and it's something that's still unfolding in our all our lives today.

Thanks be to God.