

“What Did You Expect?”

Malachi 3:1, 4:1-6 • Luke 7:18-35

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It seems to me that the Christmas story has to be the most well known story of all time. People of every faith and even people of no faith are familiar with the characters in the biblical Christmas story. We know all about Joseph and Mary and of course baby Jesus. We know about the shepherds and the angels and the wise men and Frosty and Rudolph.

But there's a part of the Christmas story that I think we too often leave out and that's John the Baptist. Somehow we don't think of his birth as part of the Christmas story. And yet we read about John the Baptist in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

In fact, Mark 1, which doesn't even mention the birth of Jesus, begins, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” What he's saying is that the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *is* John the Baptist and his message of repentance.

Luke's gospel, which has the most detailed description of Jesus' birth, also begins with the story of John the Baptist. That's what we want to look at this morning. John's father, Zechariah, was one of the temple priests. One day each year, on the Day of Atonement, a priest would enter the innermost part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, which was the place of God's presence. At the time there were so many priests that they used a lottery to choose the priest who would get the honor. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for that priest and it happened that Zechariah was selected. Usually this service turned out to be pretty routine and so Zechariah didn't expect it to take very long. But as we will

see today, God is often at work in spite of our expectations.

In this case, Zechariah was met by an angel—a messenger from God—who told him that his elderly wife was going to have a baby. For years he and Elizabeth had prayed for a child. But by this time they had probably long since given up. They kept praying the prayers out of habit but had given up expecting God to answer their prayers. How often do you and I do the same thing? We start out fervently praying for something. But over time we just kind of give up on God. And now this angel tells Zechariah that not only will they have a son but that this child will be used in a special way by God – he will be the first prophet in Israel in over 400 years. John the Baptist is the last messenger of the old covenant. He's the bridge to Jesus and the new covenant.

Through the prophet Malachi, who was the last prophet in Israel, God had promised that He would send someone, the prophet Elijah, to prepare the way for the Messiah. In fact, Luke tells us that the angel used the very same words as Malachi. The point is that John the Baptist is the one who fulfills the promise made by God hundreds of years before. But since it had been more than 400 years no one was really expecting it, especially Zechariah. His response is one of not only doubt but downright disbelief. He says, “how do I know this is true?” Never mind that it's an angel telling him this. And so the angel tells him that because he didn't believe, he will be mute until the baby is born. For nine months Zechariah cannot speak a word.

When the time comes, Elizabeth gives birth, which is a surprise to her neighbors and relatives. Zechariah and Elizabeth take the baby to be circumcised according to the law and everyone expects them to name the baby after his father. What a surprise when Elizabeth says, “He shall be called John.” In fact, they don't believe her and

they try to get Zechariah to tell them. He asks for a tablet and he writes, "His name is John."

Immediately Zechariah can speak again. In fact, the first thing Zechariah does is to sing a song of praise to God. I wonder. Would that be your first response? Is that your response today to what God is doing in your life?

Now we come to our reading from the seventh chapter of Luke. John has finished his ministry and is in prison. He's probably aware that he will be executed soon and he begins to wonder whether he was mistaken about his cousin Jesus. He was certain that Jesus was to be the Messiah but Jesus doesn't seem to fit his expectations. Like many people at the time, John expected that the Messiah would bring a political revolution and establish his kingdom in Jerusalem. But while John sits in prison Jesus goes around preaching and healing people, not starting a revolution.

So John sends two of his followers to ask Jesus if He really is the Messiah or if they are to be looking for another. Jesus says, "Go tell John what you see." And then he points them to several passages from Isaiah about what it will be like when the Messiah comes. Isaiah 35:5 says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped," and Isaiah 61:2 says, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." Jesus is basically saying, "go tell John that I am fulfilling the Scriptures."

At this point Jesus turns his attention to the crowd gathered around him and began to talk about *their* expectations. Many people went to see John and later Jesus basically for the show. They went to hear John's fiery preaching and they went to see Jesus work miracles. They weren't going out of faith but rather for the entertainment, for what they could get out of it.

Talking about John, Jesus says, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Why did you

go? Were you going for the entertainment? To see his fancy clothes? Did you go hoping to see a new prophet?" Then he tells them, "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." What he's saying is that John is in fact the promised messenger, the prophet Elijah.

At this point Jesus tells them this little proverb about the children who would not dance and would not cry. He's referring to himself and to John the Baptist. Jesus is saying that John called the people to repentance but they refused to repent. Likewise, they didn't respond to the Good News that Jesus brought. The Kingdom of God had come to them and they were indifferent. They refused to participate.

You and I are faced with the same question today. What did you come here to see? What did you expect when you walked in this morning? A show put on by the preacher and the choir? Beautiful people with elegant clothes? What did you come here expecting?

Did you come to worship this morning expecting Jesus Christ to show up in the power of the Holy Spirit? Did you come expecting to have an encounter with the Living God? Worship is the place where heaven and earth meet. We come into the presence of Jesus through His Church. And if you really want to experience that kind of worship you must come with eager anticipation that you really will see Jesus at work. Be looking for ways that He is present.

That's the meaning of Communion, which we will have in a few moments. The Lord's Supper is a physical reminder of the presence of Christ right here in our worship, in His Word and in His people. That's why it's called communion. It's a joining together. As we participate we are joined to each other and to Christ Himself. If you are distracted by your thoughts or by your watch, chances are you will miss that encounter with Christ.

Finally, the reason that we talk about John the Baptist during Advent is because Advent is a time of waiting and anticipating the coming of

Christ. John, who fulfills the promise God made to send a messenger to prepare the way for Christ, reminds us to eagerly wait for Jesus to show up, to eagerly wait for the surprising good news. My prayer is that these next few weeks, as busy as they can be, would also be a time of preparation, of eagerly anticipating the birth of the Savior, and reflecting on what it means that God came here in person.

Amen.