

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Matthew 11:2-11
Sunday, December 11, 2016

Wrestling with expectations

1. The degree to which we will be satisfied with life is largely based on the degree to which we have realistic or appropriate expectations. I recently read the book *The Princess Bride* to Bonnie and the kids. I am sure many of you have seen the movie, and the book is very similar. The book involves a father reading the story to his son, but it is all being told from the perspective of the son, having grown up, narrating what it was like to have the story read to him. At one point, it appears that the villain is going to win and the son freaks out, saying that it isn't fair. The father stops reading to him for weeks before finally realizing that the problem was that the son had an attitude that things are supposed to work out a certain way. The villain is *supposed* to lose. It isn't fair if he wins.
2. Is life fair, though? Do the villains really lose and the heroes always win? We want to believe so, but it isn't the case. There seems to be a fundamental injustice in this fallen world; one that the various writers of the psalms regularly cried out against. So many of the psalms are pleas with God for justice because the ungodly seem to prevail over the godly. The expectation of the psalmists is that God will deal with the wicked, but until the final judgment, the wicked will continuously seem to flourish and oppress the righteous.

John's expectations

1. Before Jesus formally began his ministry, John the Baptist began preparing the way. Jesus is the Messiah, or Christ, which means the anointed one. Jesus is the one who was anointed by God to come into the world to fulfill the promises of God, to seek and save the lost, and to ransom them from their sins. John had some understanding of this as he set about preaching and proclaiming the greatness of Jesus while calling people to repent and be baptized. John clearly understood- even from the womb- that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah and savior of the world.
2. Unfortunately for John, he was treated the way most of the prophets were treated. There is something about having a calling to go out to the people and hold them accountable for their sins, proclaiming God's wrath unless they repent and turn from them, that tends to make someone very unpopular. And John was no different.
3. Eventually, John crossed Herod, the so-called king of the Jews, by calling him out for marrying his brother's wife. Apparently, Herod Antipas, upon meeting his brother, Herod Philip's wife Herodias, decided that he had to have her. So he divorced his wife and Herodias divorced Philip, then the two were married. John the Baptist called Herod Antipas out on this which angered him, and angered Herodias even more.
4. By the time we get to Matthew 11, John was rotting in jail, which he would only leave for his execution. John was growing nervous and his faith became rattled, which caused him to search the scriptures for evidence of God's divine plan. Thus, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if Jesus truly was the Messiah- something John had already been proclaiming. The reason was because John was scared, but the argument he used is that Isaiah 61 says that the Messiah will set the prisoners free. Yet he, John, was still in prison. And he knew that it wasn't going to end well.
5. In reality, I don't think that John's faith truly wavered as much as he was scared. He surely knew that the history of the prophets was a bloody one. He even referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, which means he understood that the Messiah would die to fulfill God's plans. I believe that, more than anything, John was just scared at his own impending death.

6. John was correct in citing the messianic role of setting prisoners free, however. Jesus came to set the people free from their bondage to sin. Prisoners oppressed by their own unrighteousness find freedom in Christ. That is as true today as it was in John's day.
7. Jesus did respond to John by citing his own miracles in light of various prophecies found in Isaiah- the blind receiving sight; the lame walking; the dead being raised; and the poor hearing the good news. All of these activities of Jesus showed that he was the Messiah, just as John believed.
 - a. John may have had the wrong expectations, but he wasn't wrong that Jesus was the one they had been expecting. His expectations were off if he thought that God would not allow injustice to befall one of his prophets. His expectations were off if he thought that Jesus was there to release people from a physical prison instead of a spiritual one. His expectations were off if he thought that the world would joyfully receive the news of God's impending wrath because of their own unrighteousness.

Godly expectations

1. What we need to consider, then, is what our expectations are of God. Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, once said that he tried church, but it didn't work for him. There is something very off about this sentiment, and yet it doesn't fall too far from where many people are. "I go to church because it works for me. I get something for going. It fills a need."
 - a. Our reason for going to church shouldn't be for some pragmatic purpose of gaining something. Instead, we go to glorify God, to engage in the fellowship of a body of believers, and to be spiritually fed by God because we are his people.
2. I have heard similar things about prayer. People will say that they have tried prayer, but that nothing happened. It is as though they are expecting something magical. Yet prayer is, first and foremost, a conversation. We pray as a means of talking to God, the same way I have conversations with my wife. I don't call Bonnie to get something, and then determine my phone call was a failure if I don't get something out of it. I call her, or talk to her because I am in a relationship with her and that is how relationships work.
 - a. Yes, Bonnie does a lot for me. But I am not with her because she doesn't things for me. She does things for me because we are in a relationship. Likewise, prayer is a means of communicated with our heavenly Father, with whom we have a real relationship. Yes, we ask things of him and desire his intervention in our lives. But those things come from the relationship, they are not the reason for the relationship.
3. But shouldn't life be easier for believers than unbelievers? Isn't that a reasonable expectation? Well, let's ask the psalmists; let's ask the prophets; let's ask John the Baptist; let's ask the apostles; and let's ask Jesus. As R.C. Sproul says, life doesn't get difficult until we start following Jesus. It is only then that we experience the hate the world has for God, which they direct at us as his followers.
4. So, in closing, what should our expectations be? They should be that in Christ we are adopted as beloved sons and daughters God; we have a savior and redeemer; we have a Father who knows our struggles and our pains, some of which will be dealt with in this life, and some in the next; that God will ultimately bring about justice for his glory and to avenge the oppression of his people; and that Jesus offers us freedom from the prison of sin.