

Matthew 11:2-11  
Advent 3, Year A  
December 16, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

A Prisoner of Expectations:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” What a strange question from John the Baptist.

And yet, and yet from that prison cell, John asks that poignant question, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” What a question that is! Do you hear the doubts swirling about that question? The chords of sadness? The weariness? Is this John the Baptist, imprisoned because he challenged one of the most powerful figures of his day, beginning to second-guess himself? “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

I wonder what led him to ask such a question. It seems uncharacteristic of the one who stood on the banks of the River Jordan urging the crowds that followed him to repent. It’s hard to imagine the man who challenged the establishment of his day saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” even asking such a question.

What do you suppose led him to ask from his prison cell, “Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?”

I wonder if it was a case of expectations held too tightly. Remember, John the Baptist expected one who would come with winnowing fork in his hand, one who would gather the grain and burn the chaff.

But who was the Jesus John the Baptist met?

The one who said, “I need to be baptized by you.”

And who was the Jesus John was hearing about?

The one who taught people to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them.

The one who reached out his hand to lepers and made them whole.

The one whom they called “a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.”

No wonder John the Baptist asked from that prison cell, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus was not the one he expected.

Was John a prisoner of his own expectations? I wonder.

It’s a funny thing about expectations – we couldn’t really live without them. They carry us through our days. They help us navigate the world. Take a moment. Think about your expectations. Mine cover a wide range. I expect other cars to stop at stop signs. I expect the traffic reports on 511 to be reliable. I expect people to behave in predictable and responsible ways most of the time. Most of the time those expectations serve me well. But sometimes....

Sometimes our expectations can lead us down an either-or kind of a path---that’s the kind of path I think John was on. He was expecting the anointed one, the messiah, to come with a winnowing fork. He expected the God of Judgment – the one who separates wheat from chaff – and almost missed the God of Shalom – the one who brings water to dry lands, the one who makes the lame to leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless to sing for joy.

I wonder if our neighboring diocese San Joaquin isn’t on one of those either-or paths – either you share a particular set of understandings about God and Jesus – expectations if you will – or you’re on the wrong path. Those either-or paths are dead ends. They lead to schism; and that, for my money, is nowhere. God’s love and mercy are far wider than anything any of us can imagine – wide enough to embrace both sides of either-or.

Expectations can trip us up. We can stumble over them and lose our way. I think that’s particularly true in the case of expectations of God.

We can find ourselves wondering with John, “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” Another closer to our expectations.

One that operates on our timetable.  
One that answers us on our terms.  
One that’s on the side we’re on.

We can hold fast to our expectations of God and end up missing God in our midst. For ours is a God of the unexpected – one who comes to us as a baby in a stable, one who dines with sinners and outcasts, one who heals on the sabbath,

one who dies on the cross. Ours is a God who comes to us in places and times when we would least expect to meet God.

Take a moment to remember the times in your life when you've been surprised by God's presence right there in the moment, when you have been stopped in your tracks by the presence of the Holy One, when you've found your expectations shattered by an encounter with God in an unlikely time or place or person. Ours is a God who breaks into the prison walls of our expectations and sets us free – free from the categories we fit God into, free to encounter the Holy One in the messiness of our daily life, free to see God in the faces of people we meet around the table, free to encounter the Holy One in our midst and in ourselves. Amen