

"What Do You Expect?"
Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11
December 12, 2004
The Rev. Carol S. Wedell

What do you expect? Well, I can tell you what I *didn't* expect. I did not expect to be standing before you this morning, preaching my last sermon as parish associate here at Fairmount! If you had asked me three months ago what I thought the next year held for me, I would have answered something like, "doing what I'm doing now." And there would have been good reason for that answer. For my experience as a member of the staff here at Fairmount for nearly 4 years has been joy-filled. On more than one occasion, I have said that I had the perfect job. I have wonderful colleagues. I have enjoyed working with many different groups and supporting various activities. Above all, my greatest joy has been to be a part of your lives, in large and small ways. My time here at Fairmount has been good for me – both as a person and as a pastor.

However, my expectations for the future were dramatically altered by a phone message left at my home late in September. The call was from a member of the Pastor Nominating Committee at the Church of the Western Reserve, where I filled in temporarily 5 years ago, when their pastor was on sabbatical. Would I be interested in submitting my PIF (church language for resume) for the position of pastor? As I stood in the kitchen staring at the answering machine, I stunned myself by not simply calling her back, and saying "No, thank you." Yet something within me could not do that. And while it has taken me nearly half a century to do so, I have learned to pay attention to that inner voice, claiming it as one of the ways in which God may be speaking to me.

So I began to explore whether or not this might be where God was leading me. As things progressed, I became more and more excited and energized by the possibility. If the congregation of the Church of the Western Reserve votes in the affirmative on January 2nd, then I my last Sunday with you as parish associate will be January 9th. Not at all what I expected!

However, please notice that my sermon title this morning is not "What *did* you expect?" rather, "What *do* you expect?" For while the season of Advent does allow us to glance briefly in the rear-view mirror, the texts for this morning propel us forward into a future which is breaking in on us, even as we speak.

This morning we are greeted once again (surprise, surprise!) by John the Baptist. (You just can't get rid of this guy in Advent!) However, unlike last Sunday when he was speaking harsh words to *us*, this week we hear him speaking surprisingly harsh words about Jesus – the very one whose way he was preparing!

Always outspoken, John's words have finally gotten him in trouble. He finds himself behind bars. Sitting in his jail cell, John began to hear "what the Messiah was doing." And he wasn't sure what to make of what he heard. Think about the kind of Messiah John expected: one who would baptize with fire, and who separated out those who failed to measure up. As Louise so aptly put it last week – the vision John presents rightly makes all of us – especially church-going type folk – very uncomfortable. John, who so strongly denounced the sins of the people, expected Jesus to carry out the final judgment. John's view of the world was black and white – and he cut to the chase.

Now John finds himself sitting in a jail cell, and he hears about Jesus healing the sick, eating with sinners, even talking with women. Something is wrong with this picture! John's expectations of the Messiah don't line up with what he has heard about Jesus. What he expected wasn't happening. So John sends word to Jesus, and asks a searing question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" In other words, are you the real thing, or not? If you are, then what on earth is going on? Potent words are directed toward the one whom John has baptized not so long before. Jesus' biggest supporter has turned into his biggest critic.

Jesus answers, "Go and tell John what you hear and see (in other words – don't believe what I say, use your own ears and eyes to describe what you know): 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."

If you were listening closely, you may have noticed that when Jesus describes what kinds of things he has been doing, his words are reminiscent of the passage we heard read from Isaiah this morning: "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..." John's expectation of a Messiah -- a mighty ruler who brought ultimate judgment upon the people -- is challenged by another prophetic expectation: the giving of life to the lifeless.

John's preconceived notions of the Messiah blinded him to the reality in front of him. John's view wasn't wrong – it just wasn't complete. His fixed expectations kept him from seeing God's activity in the here and now. Jesus simply didn't measure up to the Messiah John expected.

Which leads me back to my original question – what do *you* expect? At this time of year when expectations abound, you can readily separate the kids from the adults. For children tend to expect a lot – and not just in terms of gifts. They can envision a perfect Christmas and in some ways, a perfect world. As adults, our expectations are usually much more subdued. We have lived long enough to be “smarter” about such things – or so we think.

So, this third Sunday in Advent, what do you expect? What are you looking for in a Messiah? I am well aware that we don't often speak in those terms. Yet this advent season, when we seek to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ into our lives, it seems important to ask the question. What if I asked you (or me, for that matter), what you are looking for when you come to church on Sunday mornings? My guess is that for many of us, the answer would be something like, “something to inspire me” or “something to get me through the week.”

Now expand the question to what do you expect of God's coming into your lives this Advent season. Unless I'm mistaken, I would bet that most of us set our expectations fairly low. We aren't expecting the kind of world-shaking transformation described in Isaiah, or the fiery judgment of which John speaks. Again, we would probably be happy with some strength for the week ahead, or an extra dose of inspiration.

But the One who comes, the One whose advent we anticipate, does not match our expectations either. Even our meager expectations stand in the way of our seeing and hearing God's coming into our lives. How easy it is to ignore that small voice inside, or the call which comes from without. The One whose birth we celebrate in quiet candlelight and joyous song, shatters our expectations.

Listen again to what Jesus says his ministry is about: “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.” In other words, the world as we know it is turned upside

down. Those are the signs that the Messiah is here: wholeness, health, life, justice and peace. Those are not paltry expectations, my friends. To expect such things is to see our lives and the life of the world totally transformed.

What would it mean for us to have such expectations? Listen to these words of challenge by Graham Cook (from "The sign of his presence," in *Exceeding our Limits: Prayer Handbook 1991*):

*The signs of his presence
are blind people who can see,
and lame who walk again,
those whose skin diseases are cleared,
the deaf who can hear,
the dead who are brought back to life,
and the poor who have reason
for delighting in the good news they hear.*

*If these are the signs of his presence
and we are the ones who say he is coming,
what are we going to say
when they ask where he is?
What are we going to do
to justify our claim
that he is on his way?
Singing carols
with mince pies afterwards
is not enough.*

Maybe that is part of the reason we set our expectations so low. For we know that to truly expect the coming of Jesus into the world, requires much more of us than the token offerings we make to others at this time of year. We know that to rally around that hopeful vision of a new world is not enough. To have high expectations of the Messiah means to have high expectations of ourselves.

Friends, maybe it is time that we had lofty expectations – both of God and of ourselves. Maybe its time to expect more, not less from God, from ourselves and from our community of faith. God knows, in a world of increased poverty, increased terrorism and intolerance, more faith, more hope and more action are needed.

Opportunities abound for living out those high expectations. Within this congregation, your time could be utilized in a myriad of ways. Volunteers are needed at every age from the nursery through high

school to nurture and teach those we have promised to raise in the faith; to work in our church office; to drive some of our seniors to church; to provide meals to those in need of a little assistance; to help with Project Renewal; to be trained as Stephen Ministers -- and that's just the short list! Our dollars will go a long way toward providing appropriate, positive places for our youth to be – whether here at Open Doors, or at the Heights Youth Center. Your talents are needed both here at Fairmount, your places of employment and in many other locations around our community.

What do you expect? My prayer for each one of you – and for myself – is that we might endeavor to expect the coming of the One who will bring healing and wholeness for all of creation, and that we might be the ones who live out those expectations in every thing we do. This Advent season, let's be kids again – and dare to expect it all!

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