

Advent 2 + December 4, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Isaiah 11:1-10
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Expectations. So much of our life is controlled by them.

When expectations are met, it is reassuring. Take our dining experiences: We often choose to eat at restaurants where we know exactly what to expect. A McDonald's hamburger is the same around the world. The Sunshine Skillet at Bob Evans is always reliably consistent. The bowl of oatmeal at Deb's Squeeze Inn in Milton can't be beat. We don't want to be surprised at these places by anything that's different from what we expected.

On the other hand, when expectations are not met, that can be a source of frustration and even anger. We expected more than one morsel of chicken in our can of hearty chicken soup. We expected to get more than 95,000 miles out of our 2004 Saab. We expected that if we worked hard at our job, our company would support us instead of laying us off two years before retirement. We expected our kids would figure out how to earn a good living. We expected that if we gave our lives to our church, just like our parents gave theirs, that the church would survive...somehow.

Clearly we'd rather have our expectations met, than not, right? But take a few moments now and picture what life would be like if all your expectations were met.

Life would be: Comfortable. Pleasant. Reassuring. Predictable. Bland. Lacking in color. In music, predictability is the kiss of death. In a given piece you cannot know exactly what's coming at every step; there have got to be some surprises, or, why listen? This is what distinguishes a Mozart from a Salieri, for those of you who remember that movie. In a world where all your expectations were met you wouldn't have any colorful stories to tell, like the appearances of angels, as some of you have told me you've experienced. What kind of a world would it be if things happened only as

we expected?

In the centuries before the birth of Christ, the people of Israel were longing and hoping for a Messiah to deliver them from captivity and restore to them the fullness of life. They expected him to be a certain kind of king, much like those who had come before.

A quick bit of history: After the people of Israel escaped slavery in Egypt and started to become a nation in Canaan in 1300 BC, they didn't have a king. Instead they were governed by a series of men and women called Judges, raised up by God, who protected them from attacks and invasions. Eventually the people demanded a king to rule over them in the same way as the other nations around them had. Saul became the first king of Israel. When Saul turned away from God, in his place God raised up a new king, David, and thereafter a dynasty of kings from the line of David starting with Solomon. Kings in this House of David ruled Israel, and later Judah, until the final king, Zedekiah, was carried off to exile in Babylon in the mid-6th century BC.

After the Israelites' return from exile they were ruled by Persia, then Greece, then Rome, but all the while carried a strong expectation for the Messiah—a great king who would fulfill the ancient prophecy of Nathan to David in 2nd Samuel that God would “raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and [the Lord] will establish his kingdom ... and the Lord will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

Let's look at some of Israel's expectations of this mighty king, this Messiah, from the Hebrew Scriptures. We just sang about such a king in Psalm 72, one who would rescue the poor and crush the oppressor. Here are some other majestic images:

- Genesis 49:10—“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.”
- Numbers 24:7—“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.”

- Psalm 110:3, from the translation of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament: “With thee is dominion in the day of thy power, in the splendors of thy saints: I have begotten thee,” God says of the coming king, “from the womb before the Morning Star.”

We have, then, this strong expectation of the Messiah, the deliverer of Israel, as one holding a scepter, seated on a mighty throne, and wielding great power.

How cosmically vast, then, is the degree to which these expectations were overturned! Instead of a mighty monarch God gives the world a baby, as weak and vulnerable as any newborn.

Instead of a throne we have a manger, an open box from which horses and cattle eat.

Instead of an array of courtiers to welcome the new king, we have a band of shepherds, the lowliest in the social order.

As the child grows into a man we have not a thundering evangelist pounding his fist into his pulpit, but an itinerant preacher who frequently needs to go off by himself to pray to regain his strength, and whose first attempt at public ministry, in his home town, is ridiculed and violently rejected.

And instead of a sovereign in a bejeweled crown and velvet robes we have a near-naked man hanging on a cross.

“This, this,” we sing, “This is the Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.” This is the shoot of Jesse, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, a fragile sprout, unnoticed by most of the world, that emerged from the stump that was the House of David, that royal line that seemed to have been cut down.

Why? Why would the God bring us the Messiah in this form?

Because God wants to know us intimately, and for us to know God. Jesus is God in the flesh. And how else could we come to know God, and to believe in the love God has for us, than through

another human being just like ourselves, one whose weakness in the eyes of the world led him to suffer just as we do and to die just as we will? Yet of course we not have a WEAK Savior! For Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, descended into hell to do battle Satan and the rose victorious from the grave with the promise of eternal life that is ours. The world has not known strength greater than that! And Matthew tells us in our Gospel reading today the Messiah comes with the cosmic power to judge, gathering wheat into the granary and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire—a reminder that it is for God, not us, to render all forms of judgment on other human beings.

But it is in our own vulnerability that we come to know this Messiah—he who is there in the midst of our pain to take us into his arms with reassurances of forgiveness and love, he who picks us up and carries us on his shoulders safely home when we are lost, he who keeps reminding us in every circumstance of our existence, in every worldly setback, that life, not death, has the last word. Because, after all, talk about expectations: When this humble man, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, died that gruesome death on Good Friday, everyone expected that was the end of hope. For one long day and part of another, those dark expectations were met. But then on Sunday morning there was the empty tomb, and then the risen Christ.

So, in this pre-Christmas season when the world is screaming its promises at us—buy this and you'll be happy because it will fulfill all your expectations—remember that God's promise for the salvation of the world came to pass as something completely unexpected, hidden in a shoot that sprouted up from a stump, something that hardly anyone noticed. Let us be alert for all those ways large and small in which God surprises us by overturning our expectations, For it is there in those surprising places that we see the Holy Spirit at work, bringing us new life and a new hope.

And open yourself to the Savior who longs to dwell in your heart, and is simply waiting for you to say, "Come in." AMEN.