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# WHAT WERE YOU EXPECTING?

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*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*



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PASTOR BRAD

An old drunk was walking along the riverbank one evening, and he came along a group of church-type folks gathered to be baptized. Well, when you're 'under the influence' one line is just as good as another – it must be something good if there's a line! So when it came his turn the pastor escorted the unsuspecting man down the riverbank, and dunked him backwards under the water.

He comes up spitting and sputtering, and the pastor said, "Have you found Jesus?"

And the poor drunk, quite in shock, didn't answer right away. So the minister dunked him again, holding him under a little longer; brought him up and asked again, "Have you found Jesus, my son?"

This time the drunk managed to respond, "Um... No"

So the minister dunked him a third time and held him under, struggling and flailing, even longer than before. When he finally brought the poor man up from the water, the minister asked him again, "Have you found Jesus?"

And the drunk looked at him and said, "No – but are you sure this is where you lost him?"

People's expectations rarely match the reality of the situation.

When I was 16, my mother found my cigarettes in my jacket. That morning when I came downstairs, she didn't yell, she didn't threaten; she simply and quietly asked, "Who buys your cigarettes for you?" And nothing more.

When I said, "I do," she put the pack of cigarettes back and walked away.

Now, this wasn't the first time that I disappointed my mother, and it certainly wasn't the last. But this one sticks in my memory like gum on my shoe. She was so quiet about it. I had always been the good son. She really wanted a 'good son.' I think something broke in her that day. I think she came to a realization: that her expectations of me didn't match the reality of the situation.

Some people aren't as lucky as I am. My mother lived long enough to see my life turn around. She saw me go back to school and graduate with my BA. She saw my repentance, if you will.

We all have expectations. We have expectations of the President. We have expectations of our teachers. We have expectations of our children – and our parents!

We have expectations of everybody – what they should be like, what they should do and what they should say -- even your pastor!

The people in today's reading were no different – they had expectations of what the Messiah should be like and what he should do and say.

*“...the people were filled with expectation,”* it says, *“and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah...”* Luke 3:15

And they really wanted a Messiah. They needed a Messiah now more than ever – or so they thought. They expected the Messiah would solve their problems.

Times were tough. The situation with the Romans was terrible. They were an occupied territory, and they were crying out for someone to deliver them. They weren't sure how, exactly, but surely, the Messiah would be some kind of great warrior....

They believed that through the Messiah God would intervene once more and give them back control of Palestine, which had been taken over by the Romans in 63 BCE. In fact, for centuries before that Palestine had been under foreign control, basically since 587 BCE when Babylon conquered Jerusalem. So there was a deep longing for independence and self-government. They believed the Messiah would come with a flaming sword on a white stallion to lead a rebellion against the occupation of their land.

John the Baptist may have come pretty close to their expectations. He was charismatic, he was loud; he was the son of a priest, and his apocalyptic cult out there in the wilderness had many followers. Like the prophets of the past, he denounced their sins and those of their nation. He pointed out their failure to faithfully follow God.

“Repent!” he warns. “You brood of vipers!” In the verses just preceding today's passage, John and crowd had quite a conversation. He yells at them – sorry – he preaches to them to repent. “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees...” he says. “Bear good fruit or be cut down and thrown in to the fire!”

He tells them that their ancestry won't help them, either: “So what if you're a ‘son of Abraham’, big whoop. God can make sons of Abraham out of rocks. Sons of Abraham are a dime a dozen. They can't rely on their genetics, so they're going to have to do something, change something – like their lives – and repent.

Brash, loud, kinda wild and crazy – this guy must be the Messiah come to deliver them from the Roman oppression. God had sent noisy, half-crazed prophets

before. God showed up in the Old Testament as fire and wind and smoke. Of course God's deliverer would come blazing through the desert! Maybe in a chariot of fire or something equally dramatic, flames licking up the mess of the world. As one writer puts it, "Only those wet with the purifying waters of baptism, would survive."

Their expectations seemed to be fulfilled in John the Baptist, but as usual God had other plans. John was not the messiah and didn't waste any time in denying it:

*"John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17)*

Whoa! If John isn't worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals, the work of one of the lowest slaves in the household, the Messiah must truly be a great warrior.

But then Jesus came along. Jesus is rather quiet in this passage. In fact, in Luke's version that we read today, he doesn't say a word. Nobody notices when he shows up. He's just another face in the crowd. We can't even be certain they know who Jesus is. And John expected Jesus to baptize him, not the other way around. Having John do the baptism shows the humility of Jesus. How can a Messiah – the great warrior who's going to take back the nation – be humble?

But God never uses the people we would expect. Moses with the speech issues; Joseph, the spoiled brat; David, the little shepherd who grew up to be an adulterer, Noah the drunk, I could go on... the point is we wouldn't expect God – or anyone – to use the people God uses. So why would God in the flesh be what we expect?

They were expecting a new King of the Jews and all they got was a helpless little baby born to poor parents in a cave or stable. They were expecting a new King of the Jews, a Messiah, deliverer, and all they got was an ordinary guy, in his late twenties, from the ordinary town of Nazareth; the son of a carpenter and a carpenter himself. He was just another guy getting baptized with the rest of them. How could this be the Messiah, the great deliverer of the people?

In Luke 4, when Jesus first reads from the the scroll in his home town synagogue, he doesn't meet his neighbors expectations. "Isn't this Joseph's boy?" Jesus keeps talking -- which turned out to not be a very good idea – they end up trying to throw him off a cliff.

Jesus' idea of what the Messiah should be and do was completely different from the people's expectations. Jesus was far from being a great warrior --

He never encouraged conflict or warfare. Instead, he said, "Blessed are the gentle, they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called sons of God...Do not repay evil for evil, turn the other cheek, love your enemies..." And your reward will be great in heaven?!?!

John preached about the Messiah's kingdom coming with power and justice. Jesus' ministry centered on love -- mercy, healing, and compassion.

The people had expectations all through the gospels. In Matthew, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do the people say I am?" Turns out the people think Jesus is John the Baptist back from the dead – or Elijah, or some other dead prophet. Because they don't expect the Messiah to be like Jesus, they don't recognize him. Only Peter does, but God opened Peter's eyes.

Even John himself when he was in prison, started to doubt his own expectations. In Matthew, John sent messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" You can almost hear the disappointment. The subtext seems clear: "You're not what I expected."

Even after the crucifixion, two disciples on the road to Emmaus still didn't recognize the Messiah. They said, "Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free" (Luke 24:21). Their expectation was that Jesus "would be the one to set Israel free," but the expectation didn't match reality.

A friend of mine years ago told me something that I will never forget. He said that all our frustrations are caused by expectations unmet. All our anger - our resentments -- are because somebody or some thing didn't live up to our expectations. And instead of telling me to lower my expectations, which is usually the advice, he told me to not have any at all. "If you don't have any expectations, you'll never be disappointed." And I think he was right. When I get upset or angry or frustrated, as I am apt to do, I can usually trace it back to some unmet expectation. Why do I get mad at Mindy (my dog) when there's trash all over the kitchen? Could it be because I expected more from her than what she was capable of? Maybe I expected the house to look the same as it did when I left.

How do our expectations color the world as we trudge through it? Is it possible not to have any expectations? How many marriages fail because of unrealistic expectations?

We just celebrated the New Year. How many people made resolutions that have already fallen by the wayside? Resolutions set us up for failure because they're often a promise with unrealistic expectations.

When expectations rule our lives, we set ourselves up for disappointment. Then guess what? It's a double whammy! First we're disappointed, and then instead of loving ourselves, we judge ourselves.

We expect ourselves to be successful and rich and popular. Or we expect ourselves to fit and healthy and athletic. Or contemplative and holy and spiritual. Well, as Alan Watts once said, "Waking up to who you are requires letting go of who you imagine yourself to be." Getting rid of those expectations.

The Buddhists teach not to grasp onto things – not to cling or hold on. We have a similar teaching – to let Go and let God. Cast your burdens on the lord. Don't worry about tomorrow.... It's the same thing. Let go. Let go of those expectations or you're sure to be disappointed.

I may have mentioned before that you are God's beloved. I taped it to the mirror out there in the narthex, says it: "In whom I am well pleased." If you haven't looked at it lately, I encourage you to look at it today.

And Remember, when God said that to Jesus, Jesus hadn't done a thing yet.

You are God's beloved, and God is well pleased.

Amen.