

Advent 3, Year A,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

15th December, 2019

James 5:7-10 NRSV / Matthew 11:2-11 NRSV

Unfulfilled expectations can be disappointing, can't they?

When you plan and look forward to something for a long time,

then when the time finally arrives

and the reality is different from what you expected,

it can be a pretty big let down.

Maybe it's a big vacation you've dreamed about for years,

only to find that when you finally make it there,

the reality was quite different from the brochures,

or the weather did not cooperate whatsoever.

But it's not just events that can let us down.

People, especially our friends and family can cause us disappointment as well.

Often we have expectations of people based on our own perspective,

how we would handle something or react to situations,

and when others react in a different way

or take a different approach to something,

we find ourselves let down and disappointed.

I see it in my own family.

Every family gathering there are always some

who expect a certain uncle will be there on time for dinner,
then they are disappointed and frustrated when he arrives late,
even though he has rarely ever been on time
for most things historically,
and all those who get frustrated know that detail all too well.

After all, our expectations usually stem from our own perspective,

how we understand things should work;
how we would approach and react to any particular situation.

The problem arises when we try to impose our interpretation of reality on others.

In the case of my uncle, those who are frustrated and disappointed
are trying to impose their expectations,
how they would approach that situation,
unrealistically on him
and expecting the results to be how they would respond,
not taking into account the reality of his perspective.

When I talk to couples in premarital counseling,

I always advise
that they need to have realistic expectations of their partners.

They have to be happy with the facets of their personalities
exactly as they are right now;
to do differently would be to have unrealistic expectations
and to set oneself up for disappointment.

In our gospel lesson this morning, John finds himself in that very situation.

He has spent his whole life prophesying and preparing
for what he expects will solve not only his problems, but those of his people.
Like many of his contemporaries,
 he was expecting the Messiah to be a great deliverer,
 someone who would come to relieve the nation from oppression
 and restore the glory of old.

And lo and behold, here comes Jesus to be baptized,
 who is ordained and blessed by a voice from on high.
So John was thinking, this is it, he's here,
 great wrath will surely befall their oppressors
 and everything will be made right.

Yet here he is, languishing for over a year in prison with no hope in sight.
So he sends his disciples to interrogate this messiah
 to see if he's the real deal or is he just another prophet.
He's having doubts.
 Surely this can't be it.
 Surely Jesus will round up a white horse to ride in and save the day.

Yet when his disciples catch up to Jesus teaching and preaching,
 he's obviously not on a majestic white steed,
 and not armed for battle against the Romans and Herod Antipas.
He's healing and sharing good news with those who have none.

Yet he is not offended by John's doubt.
In fact he applauds him for his role as the one who prepares the way for him,

elevating John above others,

yet acknowledging that he, like all disciples, has growth ahead of him.

John, while a great prophet, was also a human disciple.

Like us, his perception and expectations

stemmed from his own understanding of how things should work.

Like many Jewish men of his day,

he had a deep knowledge of the book of Isaiah.

He knew the predictions in and out, and like many of his contemporaries,

he expected a savior to arise fulfilling all of those promises,

right here, right now.

Jesus, too knew Isaiah like the back of his hand,

and paraphrases Isaiah 35 and 61 in telling John's disciples

that 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."

Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah,

just not in the manner that John and others expected.

John's expectations of Jesus did not meet the reality he experienced.

He was frustrated, and felt left down.

But that's something I'm sure we can all identify with.

We know what that's like, when others don't meet our expectations,

when things don't turn out as we plan or expect.

We can doubt those we relied on to respond in a certain way,

and we can doubt our ourselves and the validity of our own perceptions.
And like John, when we find ourselves languishing in this life,
doubt can creep into our thoughts as well.

When we find ourselves beset with health issues, financial worries,
sadness, grief or any number of things that make life a struggle,
we can find ourselves questioning why is God allowing this,
why aren't we being saved from our misery?

Living in this liminal space "between times,"
we too face the same struggle as John in our story today.

It's an Advent struggle,
it's a struggle of waiting and patience; a struggle of perspective.

Many of us, like those of John's day,
see the world around us appearing to get darker and darker,
thinking things can't get any worse, surely Jesus is coming soon.

Yet he doesn't come riding in on a white horse in our time either.

It is what life is, in the "in between" of now,
between the promise of Christmas and the promise of eternity.

The salvation Jesus brings is one of paradoxes:
strength through weakness,
prominence through humility, greatness by being meek.

The Christ that comes at Christmas doesn't offer a way out of now,
but a new way of being now.

A way that doesn't depend on success or well-being in this world.

A way that values those who suffer and struggle
over those whose walk is privileged and easy.

One that places value in others,
and finds joy in caring and sharing that good news with others.

One that finds joy in the knowledge
that anything we suffer with in this world
is a temporary inconvenience,
that we will come out the other side whole.

Jesus' followers discovered the joy in a simple life together,
a life of fellowship and compassion,
with love and witnessing to the joy of living in this world, but not of this world.

Yet the joy of discipleship is by definition a difficult path.
As John discovered, walking a path in opposition to the ways of the world
often leads to persecution.
Speaking prophetic truth to power can land one in jail, or worse.

To walk with Jesus is to take the good and the bad,
the glory and good news of Christmas,
with the shame and solitary suffering of Easter.

So this third Sunday of Advent we find ourselves waiting in the “in between” time:
waiting for the promise of return
and waiting to again celebrate the promise of arrival.
It’s a reflective time but also one of joy.
Joy in the promise of a future renewal and joy

in the arrival of what makes that promise possible.

But that joy is not found in passive reflection. The disciple's walk is an active one.

We have a witness to give, a gospel to share.

Our most effective witness is how we find joy in living a simple life of love,
a life in contrast to the darkness around us.

We show joy in being willing to give of ourselves for others,
as our savior gave of himself for us.

Our Christian journeys should bring joy to our hearts,
not be ones of burden, guilt or sorrow.

During this next week of Advent,

I would encourage you to reflect on what in your life of faith brings you joy,
and how you can bring joy to others not only this week,
but every week going forward.

As with the themes of hope and peace, we are called to live and share joy as well.

In your bulletins, you will find another sheet for you to use for reflection
as we are entertained by our special music this week.

I would encourage you to spend a few minutes
and think of at least one way you can seek joy in your walk with Christ this week,
and at least one way you can share and witness joy to someone else as well.

Feel free to drop your reflection in the offering plate on your way out this morning
as a sign of your commitment to your Creator to seek
and share joy in the week ahead. Amen.