

“What were you expecting?”

- It was just the other day, a month or so ago, I woke up on a regular Tuesday morning, alarm beeping right on time... as expected
- And I walked into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, as I always do
- ... and saw a fantastic surprise!
- That it had snowed the first snow of the season overnight
- And I had no idea it was going to come- and it was a wonderful surprise, a wonderful interruption into my expected routine
- I was so giddy about it that I Face-timed my mother to show her!
 - Because you are never too old to call your mom.
- Surprises like this are fun, mainly because if you know me, you know I am a pretty organized kind of person
- I like schedules, I like routine, I schedule my unscheduled time
- We live and die by the calendar at my house, because who knew kids have such an active social life!
- Now the drawback to such proclivity is that it does not leave room for surprises very often, does it?
- And some surprises are good ones, right?
- I think knowing this about myself, my habit of planning and creating expectations and such,
 - Was the main reason we chose NOT to know the sex of our first child
- By not knowing, by choosing to be surprised,
- We stayed in the mystery and pushed back on the tendency to meet the little person before he was ready to meet us!
- Like these two here, some broken expectations are appreciated and enjoyed
- However, others are less so, and can be devastating
- They can require us to rethink everything, require us to grieve,
- They can fundamentally change who we are when we did not want it.
- Expectations are powerful in both cases
- They are powerful both leading up to an event, and shaping our feelings about it afterward
- And it is especially true when it comes to our spiritual lives

- Today, I think God is asking us a question, this third Sunday in Advent, a season of hopeful expectation:
 - “What were you expecting?”
- And gently, or maybe even not so gently, breaking those expectations to more open us up to what God has for us
- That, I think, can be a part of our Advent tasks of waiting, expectantly, but also openly
- This Sunday’s readings is full of this question, and even breaks the expectations of those we read about
 - We start with the prophet Isaiah, and we pick up today with some good news
 - However, it is coming in the midst of desolation for the Israelites
 - Last week, we read that amazing passage about a shoot growing up from a stump, featuring my namesake Jesse, the father of David
 - What we must encounter before the hope that God offers is the reality in which God offers it
 - Israel had been decimated by the Assyrians. When Isaiah writes a shoot shall grow out of a stump
 - He is picturing Israel as a clear-cut forest that has been cut, burned down, and stripped
 - The nation of Israel, the line of King David, seemingly broken forever.
 - This would have been among the most terrible brown expectations possible- grief and loss you and I can hardly imagine
 - Losing everything to an invading army and kingdom
 - Feeling cut down, when you fully expected God to protect you, and to protect the king
 - Now, I imagine Israel is defeated and expects nothing other than to remain a conquered and exiled people
 - See how through the prophet Isaiah God breaks the expectation of doom with a tiny glimmer of hope
 - Of new growth, of a promise of new life
 - And today God gives the divine dream once again
 - Isaiah says, no unclean people will travel on this road- and we can hear that instead of an exclusion of people deemed unclean
 - We see there is no one who is considered unclean- everyone is clean and in right relationship with God
 - Easy, safe travel, no wild beasts attacking; people healed and returned to wholeness
 - Dry sand that leads only to dying of thirst, now brimming with fresh water

- While I do not think God caused the Assyrians to invade, what we have over and over again is that when those terrible things happened to Israel
- God was there to try and bring something good and hopeful into that terrible situation
- God continually defied their expectations both in faithfulness, and in the possibility of what can come next
- And then we have Jesus, whose incarnation is a major step along the way for God to achieve that divine dream
 - Jesus comes onto the scene and disrupts every expectation we can have- that sounds like God to me!
 - Speaking of expectations, I honestly thought that by now we would be hearing about little baby Jesus in a manger from our readings
 - I had forgotten that Year A starts out a little bit differently
 - We are first told to stay awake and watchful, and I think to hold our expectations loosely
 - Next we are told of John the Baptist, and his ministry, and his telling about the coming of the Messiah
 - “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!”
 - And this week, a mere 2 weeks before Christmas, we are reading about John in prison, interacting with an adult Jesus
 - I think that perhaps the creators of our lectionary are still setting the scene-
 - This birth that Matthew’s Gospel is going to tell us next week, is indeed the one John has been talking about
 - But what started me on this whole line of thinking about expectations is something that jumped out at me this week as never before
 - John’s in prison, and he sends word to ask, “Are you the one who is to come? or are we to wait for another?”
 - Are you him, because you are not at all meeting my expectations.
 - Can you hear in John’s question a little confusion, a little shock, he’s been thrown a curve ball here
 - He has been talking about Jesus as the fire to his water
 - But this does not seem to be the Messiah even John was expecting...
 - I wonder if John is sitting in prison wondering if this Jesus, his cousin, is going to be able to continue this ministry and work
 - Is he up to it?
 - Perhaps, and this is just a guess, even John the Baptist had a different expectation of what the Messiah would be when he arrived

- Perhaps even John thought Jesus would overthrow the Romans, or in some way fight for God's way
- He asks, are you the one?
- Jesus just points to the people who are healed and made whole
- Points to families being reunited, communities being made whole again, lives restored
- Even death being reversed
- I guess that was good enough for John, he seems to be able to let go of his expectations to embrace what God had put right in front of him
- Then Jesus addresses it directly
- He asks the crowds: What did you expect?
- He actually says, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?" No
- "Someone dressed in soft robes?" No, those are in palaces
- A prophet? Yes, and you got more than you expected. A lot more.
- Now what?
- What I can guarantee you is that, while John was able to let go of his expectations, and Jesus's disciples eventually let theirs go too
- Some in the crowd walked away that day disappointed that Jesus was not who they thought he should be
- That God's working in this world Incarnate, in the flesh, through the least likely people and situations, was impossible to accept
- Too different, too disappointing
- What were you expecting?
 - Or perhaps, what are we expecting? Today, this week, this Advent
 - I have been praying with this question all week
 - Maybe the rose colored vestments can be a little nudge to break us out of the regular Advent routine
 - I believe that God has taught me a lot of things by frustrating my expectations first, and then helping me adjust to something new
 - Inviting me to let go of how I think something should happen, or how someone should be, or even how church ministry should go
 - And instead take a position of hopeful surprise, that God is working in ways that I cannot quite understand fully
 - And like in Isaiah, that God is working at times even when I do not see it all
 - When bad things are happening, difficult things, or just unexpected ones
 - And especially when my plans and ideas and expectations can sometimes blind me to what God is actually trying to show me

- So for this week of Advent 3, before we hear about the little baby in a manger next week next week
- I invite you to prepare for Advent by un-preparing, by releasing some expectations of just what God is and can do
- Instead of asking things of God, perhaps ask God to show you something new
- Perhaps ask God to reveal Godself even in terrible things that surprise us and cause us to grieve
- And especially with the good surprises
- And to stand back with wide eyes and amazement at what God is doing in the most unlikely ways and people.
- Even John the Baptist had to take a second look at what God was doing, was surprised
- May we too look around and with hopeful expectation at what God is doing around us this week.

Amen