

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 15, 2019 (III Advent)

Like most parents-to-be of my generation, Bryna and I pored over the classic book *What to Expect When You're Expecting* during the nine months leading up to the birth of our first child. There was information about the stages of development — “hey look, now it’s the size of a lemon!” I routinely got chided for referring to our unborn child as an “it.” There were tips about maintaining a healthy pregnancy — though I still have no idea what folic acid actually is or what it does. And there were helpful hints about baby-proofing your home, like covering up all the electrical outlets and keeping the rat poison out of reach.

I’m not sure what Mary’s regimen was like during her pregnancy. Obviously she didn’t have much time for nesting, and I don’t *think* the manger would have been considered a choking hazard. But I’m sure she had some very real *expectations* for who her child would become and what motherhood would entail.

During this season of Advent, this time of preparation and anticipation, it’s helpful to ponder what expectations *we* have for this child. What *are* your expectations for the arrival of Jesus into your life? Of course, at one level, he’s already arrived. His birth, life, death, and resurrection have already taken place. But the yearly remembrance of his birth allows us to reset our expectations and receive him anew into our hearts. And that is the true gift of this season; *that’s* the opportunity that awaits us during this time of renewed hope and expectation.

What to Expect When You're Expecting...Jesus is probably not going to be the title of a best-selling book. But our seasonal expectations are wrapped up in questions about Jesus’ identity. We wrestle with these questions in our own lives and they arise over and over again in Scripture. In the Bible, sometimes these questions about the identity of Jesus are answered with great confidence and bravado; at others, they’re answered haltingly and with hesitation.

At one point, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah! The Son of the living God.” It’s the first time Jesus’ true identity is articulated in the gospels and we can’t help but hear the question directed towards us as well. Who do you say that Jesus is? What are your expectations? These are the questions that define our lives of faith. We want to join Peter and boldly assert right along with him, “You are the Messiah!” But sometimes we struggle; with faith, with doubt, with expectations.

This morning we hear a very different question about Jesus’ identity. John the Baptist’s bluster is gone; we encounter him not boldly proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins along the banks of the River Jordan, but wasting away in a prison cell. He sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Uncertainty has crept in. Did he somehow get it wrong? In all his haste to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight, did he miss the Messiah? In John’s question, there’s a deep sense of vulnerability and even fear that he has wasted his life pointing to the wrong person. “I thought I had it right, but...Are you the one who is to come?”

When it comes to questions about Jesus' identity and our ensuing expectations, most of us live on a continuum. Somewhere between rock solid faith and brittle uncertainty. Remember that even Peter, the great apostle, the rock upon whom Jesus built his church, the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, also denies him three times. None of this is as easy as it seems. For anyone.

And complicating things is that for many, the expectations of who and what a Messiah was and would do, did not mesh with the reality of Jesus' reign. And perhaps this is what fueled John's question. Just last week we heard the Baptist announce to the crowds that while *he* baptizes with water, "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John's vision of the Messiah is like one of a great warrior who will ride into town, destroy his enemies, establish a new reign, and march on to eternal victory. And if that's the expectation, it's no wonder John is confused about Jesus' identity. Jesus is less concerned with tearing down than lifting up. In response to John's question about being the one who is to come, Jesus says to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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."

That's what to expect. That's where our expectations should be. Set upon a Savior who is always present with us, who never forsakes us, who forgives us, and who loves us deeply and tenderly and unconditionally. A Messiah who reveals God's love for humanity, not by force or fear but by faith. A Lord who loves and lifts up the brokenhearted.

The past few weeks, Jack has led the Middle School Youth Group in a unit focused on Jesus' identity. I've been amazed at their engagement with these questions and really proud of them for wrestling with the topic in such an authentic way. And they put *everything* on the table — just take a look at the walls in the youth room which are covered with newsprint, where they've scrawled their ideas and questions and expectations about Jesus. As Jack pointed out, some of the questions are answerable and some are not. Some are clearly delineated in Scripture and some leave us wondering. They've pondered his birth and life, looked at his divinity and his death. They've wondered whether he was aware of his holiness? And why he spent all of his time helping others. They asked whether people worshiped him as a kid and whether his family had pets. And they grappled with why he allowed himself to be killed and what it all meant.

Our middle schoolers are setting their expectations for a life of faith. Some things are set in stone, some things are more fluid, but it's all about cultivating a lively and living relationship with Jesus Christ. Something we all must do throughout our lives. And I find this season of holy expectation a particularly poignant time to do just that.

As helpful as the book was, I still get annoyed whenever I think about all the things that *weren't* in *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Like the fact that your child will only projectile vomit all over you when you're all dressed and heading out the door for work. And at least *some* of those teenage years. But as we wait expectantly to welcome the Christ child, know that you will receive the Jesus that you most need. That whatever your expectations, Jesus will bring with him what most needs healing in your life. And in the end, for right now, that is enough.