

Sermon 12-15-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

## **Christ: The King of an Upside Down Kingdom**

**December 15, 2019**

“Are you the Expected One, or should we look for another?” John the Baptist’s disciples came wondering if Jesus might bring a deeper rest, or if they should take their expectations elsewhere? The Christmas shopping season is filled with expectations and longings for connection, contentment and joy. We hope Santa leaves us a Lexus with that big red bow. We worry that a cranky relative will ruin the feast by mentioning the news. We dream of a white snowy Christmas which will magically make us merry and bright. Having once slept under a plastic Christmas tree on the tile floor of Brintle’s Truckstop in Mount Airy NC, I can testify that snow can close the interstate. You might miss the big party. You might arrive a day late on two hours of sleep. Your spouse, who flew to her parents, may deny you immediate access to a nice warm bed arguing, “Take a shower!! You smell like the floor of that truck stop!” When you do awaken, they may force you into an unpleasant sniff test of last night’s jeans to prove you needed that shower. Perhaps, 30 years later you still like to bring that up. Expectations can keep us living outside of the moment we are in. Expectations can consume our peace. Jesus beckons us to give, serve, love, lend, forgive, and respond without expectation of any reward. (Luke 6:27-38)

That is a kind of spiritual mastery few of us find. So let us pray:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus. Born to set all people free;  
from our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in Thee.  
Be our strength and consolation. Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
dear desire of every nation. Joy of every longing heart. Amen. ( adapted)

“Are you the Expected One, or should we look for another?” John was in prison. Matthew wanted us to know that sobering detail. John baptized Jesus and they shared a deep spiritual kinship. Dr. Martin Luther King calls both prophets “outside agitators” awakening resistance to the status quo. When King Herod executed John, Jesus pulled back from ministry seeking space to grieve. Both John and Jesus clashed with religious power brokers who colluded with willing politicians to arrest their growing movements. Mark tells us even in prison John kept preaching. Light has this amazing property. Even when there is a night without moonlight, light escapes any prison shining through the tiniest of windows or cracks. Light shines on death row, at food banks, in gallon jug beacons left along illegal border trails, through coats given away, with hugs embracing asylum seekers or healthcare delivered to the uninsured. Christ shines in unexpected ways.

John came to “prepare the way” for Christ’s coming light. I wonder how John might preach to us today? Reading the Gospel, I imagine John’s fiery preaching might shake us awake, altar our expectations and perhaps if we can take it, prepare us for Christmas: “You bunch of phonies. Why don’t you bear fruit worthy of your professed repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Jesus as our Savior!’ God can make Christians from a pile of rocks. God is fed up with your faith without works! Live like Jesus!” Stunned by his overly direct truth-telling we would ask, “How do we do that?” John replied, “If you have two coats, give one away; if you have more than enough income, feed others. In business treat people with dignity, honesty and absolute fairness. Never use your power to threaten, intimidate, or make false accusations. Be satisfied with what you have.” That sounds like Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Did John wonder what would happen to the movement as he waited in prison? Who would preach eviscerating sermons? Who would call out the church and state?

While awaiting trial, John heard what Jesus was doing and sent his disciples to check it out. "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"

"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Are we Christians? What can our neighbors expect from us? Should they move on looking somewhere else for Christ? Has the world given up on finding Jesus inside the church? Is the church known more for what it is against than who it cares for? What should people expect from anyone who dares to describe themselves with Christ's name?

"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" How do we answer this question for Jesus? Do we talk about the sinner's prayer, Virgin birth, Easter, fulfilled prophecies, crowds fed, eyes opened, or perfected theology? How did Jesus answer the question "are you the Expected One?" Jesus answered, "Go and report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them," and then Jesus adds an almost disclaimer: "and blessed is the one who does not stumble on my account." Jesus makes no theological claim at all.

What do we Jesus' kind of beatitude disclaimer: "You are blessed if you don't get tripped up on me." Maybe Jesus is worried less about titles, labels, and names than the church is. After all, Jesus preaches, "Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of God will enter God's kingdom. On the Judgment Day, many people will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we preach, kick the devils out, and do miracles in your name?' Jesus will answer, 'I've never known you.'" (Matthew 7) Jesus makes no title claim in our text but invites us to look around to "see and hear". Perhaps, Christ does not care about our churchy slogans, titles, and names as much as we do. No matter the title, if we listen and follow Jesus, it will be difficult not to fall in love with the incarnate Christ, for Jesus came to show us how fully God loves the world and each of us. Christmas tells us that God is with us, helping us to see, to walk, to get clean, to hear, and to "live life to the fullest". (John 10:10)

The earliest Christians were called "the Way". (Acts 24:14) That might be a better name for a Jesus movement than Christian. If asked, "Are you a Christian?," we might reply, "I strive to live my life in the way Jesus lived. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, the Life, and the Light that brings me purpose, a pattern, and fulfills my expectations." Jesus offers us a way of being a human being.

Now to be true to John's movement and Jesus' answer, acknowledge that Jesus cares about and cares for people with sensory or mobility challenges, those who are sick and dying, those called unclean. A theology that does not care about people's physical conditions on earth as in heaven is not a Christian theology. Indeed, Jesus tells us to take a look around at what is happening in peoples' lives. When you see people with new vision, Christ comes. When those pushed over by the world walk tall and proud, God is with us. When groups once shunned claim their sacred worth, God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. When people hear each other and carry each other's burdens, Christ appears. When people without adequate resources know lasting hope, Christ arrives. Did not Jesus tell us this in Matthew 25 that as we care for people on earth, the kingdom of heaven comes near and Christ is born again with us?

In Matthew 25, it is easy to forget how shocked the righteous are when discovering that they cared for Jesus. They did not expect that! "Lord...Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" Knowing our sacred worth, being loved, we love we see with new light. We see Christ in the hungry, thirsty, strangers, unhealthy, imprisoned, unseeing, unhearing, and just plain stuck. If we only love or care for people

because Jesus commands us to, then how is that love at all? The righteous did not expect to find Jesus in caring for people, but knowing Divine Love, they gave it away. Jesus came to show us how to live like that.

Come, Thou long expected Jesus. Born to set all people free;  
from our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in Thee.  
Be our strength and consolation. Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
dear desire of every nation. Joy of every longing heart.

Come, Love divine, free us to love your people. Amen.