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Text: Matthew 11:2 – 15
Title: The Coming One?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In first-century Israel, many Jews were expecting God through his Messiah to restore Israel to its former glory as in the days of kings David and Solomon. That was a period of time when Israel had its largest claim of territory ever, and exercised political influence over an even larger region. They were feared and respected throughout the known world. David's success in battle was legendary, and Solomon was so famous that foreign rulers came to consult him for his incredible wisdom. The Bible tells us in I Kings 10 that God blessed Solomon so much that silver was as common as stone, and it wasn't even considered valuable anymore. This was the glory of Israel that the people of Jesus' time were hoping to see come again with the arrival of the promised Messiah. Some were even hoping that the Messiah would usher in the Last Day when all things would be restored. God, they all felt, needed to make Israel great again.

Yet when God finally acted in Jesus, He did something that most people didn't expect, much like He always does. Instead of the political powerhouse that everyone seemed to expect, Jesus came preaching the Gospel. He came forgiving sins and calling all sinners to new life. He came cleansing lepers, casting out demons, healing the blind, and even raising the dead (Mt 11:5). Israel's problem was not merely their loss of former political independence and glory, but their sin and rebellion against God. Sin, death and the devil, these were the powers that Jesus the Christ overcame. More importantly than making Israel great again, Jesus came to make Israel whole again. Those who believed in Him experienced not only physical healing, but restoration in their relationship with the God of Israel.

Whatever part of the Old Testament history you choose to read, there's a common theme that appears over and over again, and that is the fact that God doesn't always act in the ways that people expect Him to act. When God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He chose Moses to act as His ambassador to Pharaoh. But He didn't call Moses when he was living richly and comfortably in Pharaoh's palace. Instead, God waited until he was reduced to living in a foreign land, working as a shepherd. When God delivered Israel from the Midianites in the book of Judges, He chose Gideon, the least important member of the least important family of his entire tribe to do it. And instead of having Gideon fight with the 32,000 men who answered the call against the Midianites, God allowed him to use only 300 men to fight and defeat them. We see the same thing happen in the familiar account of David and Goliath, God acted in a way that no one expected, and David was able to kill the armored giant of the Philistines with a sling and a rock and no armor at all. And when God passed by the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb, He wasn't in the great wind, the mighty earthquake, or the raging fire, but He was unexpectedly in the still, small voice that followed those things.

So it really shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that when God brings His ultimate deliverance to all people, He does it in a way that not many were expecting it to be, if any were expecting it that way at all. Many in Israel expected God to act in certain ways, but almost all of them expected His reign to come in a way that was irresistible to anyone. Some people, like the group called the Zealots, expected what I've already described, deliverance from Roman occupation and a return to Israel's political independence and regional dominance. This group was constantly stirring up unrest among the people, and Roman governors had to constantly be on the watch for any uprisings that the Zealots might cause. The most famous Zealot was Barabbas, the man who was freed by Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus.

Other people, like the group called the Essenes, expected the Messiah's arrival and the Lord's deliverance to bring the final judgment from God on all sinners whether they were part of Israel or not. The arrival of the Messiah was expected to bring the condemnation of all sinners and the salvation of all believers. Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it? The Essenes lived in a way that was like the monks of Medieval times and were opposed by the Pharisees and Sadducees. There is speculation that John the Baptist might have lived among them for a time, but they are famous because it's believed that they produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Whatever the group, it was universally understood that the Messiah's arrival meant that God would restore Israel to its former glory in some way, what that meant, exactly, was open to interpretation.

But in Jesus, God acted in a way that was truly unexpected. Far from being irresistible, Jesus' proclamation of Good News and His call to repentance could be resisted by someone who didn't want to believe it. People who heard Him could deny His message and deny Him as the Messiah and the Son of God. There are examples of this throughout the Gospels, and He even describes it happening in the parable of the sower when some seed falls on hard soil and is outright rejected so that the birds come and devour it. By the time He is crucified, all of His followers have denied Him.

Ironically, this wasn't possible for non-people who heard Him. Every demon and every force of nature that Jesus spoke to or commanded obeyed Him without question or resistance. The demons always knew whose presence they were in and they were never able to resist His power, and any time He performed a miracle that involved physical elements His power was also undeniable like when He stilled the storm, walked on water, or changed water into the best of wine in Cana.

As each of the Gospels show us, rather than being irresistible, the reign of heaven that Jesus brings actually subjects it to violence instead. We see the violence with John the Baptist.

Jesus leaves no room for doubt that he is the messenger who was promised by the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, but not long after John gets his answer from Jesus he is beheaded in Herod's dungeon. We see the violence against Jesus when He is rejected, arrested, beaten, and crucified. We see it with the treatment of the disciples after Pentecost when they are persecuted just as Jesus promised that they would be when He says in verse 12 of today's Gospel, "...that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." Yes, the Judgment that both John and Jesus promise will take place, but it hasn't happened yet. And until it does we are warned that things will only get worse for faithful Christians.

Well, we know what the people of Jesus' day expected His arrival to bring, so what about us? What are our expectations? You might find yourself identifying with the expectations of John the Baptist who sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the promised Messiah or if they should wait for another. It's surprising that God would act that way, and it's surprising that He doesn't seem to have kept His promise. If Jesus is really the Messiah, why hasn't everything been restored like He promised? If Jesus is the Christ, why do Christians continue to suffer persecution even today? Each of us continues to deal with the effects of sin in our life. We suffer from blindness or weakening sight. We suffer from illness and disease. We get separated from Him and from others, and we're attacked by the world around us for being faithful to Him and His Word. We suffer death and it sometimes happens in violent and painful ways. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, why does all of this still happen? Because it's still not time to fulfill His promised deliverance completely. There are people who still need to hear the Good News of Christ's arrival and God's deliverance.

And until that fulfillment happens with Christ's return, we can depend on the wonderful grace of how God did act and how He will act, unexpectedly, through the humble service of His one and only Son. Jesus came to save Israel from sin and its evil effects. He came to deliver

them from the eternal death that all people are justly condemned to suffer. The main problem of Israel wasn't their oppression by the Romans, it was their sin and rebellion against God. Our main problem isn't that America needs to be made "great again." It's that we need to be delivered from our sin and rebellion against God. The miracles that Jesus performed – the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, lepers being cleansed, deaf people hearing, the dead being raised, and Good News being proclaimed – show that Jesus is the one who came to undo the effects of sin. Maybe the people should have expected it because this was the fulfillment of so many of God's promises through the prophets, but they didn't. That God would choose to save Israel and the rest of the world through Jesus' humble service, His suffering, His death, and His resurrection is perhaps the *most* unexpected act of God ever, but it is also His most wonderful act of all!

As he sits in prison, facing death, Jesus encourages John by pointing him to the works of salvation, healing, and restoration that Jesus has performed. His works show John beyond a doubt that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the coming One, and these same works encourage us today as the people of God who receive the salvation of God in Jesus Christ, even as we continue to long for the restoration of all things that is still to come. In the epistle today, James encourages us to be patient as we await the return of Jesus. As we consider the works of Christ, we have good reason to be patient for God to fulfill all of His promises and restore all things. He has kept every promise that He has made so far, and He has promised that Christ will come again to restore all things. And that means that our patience will be rewarded because we can be sure that the rest of His promises will be fulfilled soon too. May that day come quickly. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.