

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

01.12.25 Luke 3:15-22

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ROGER

For the purposes of this sermon, we'll call him "Roger."

He was a colleague and, I thought, a friend of mine. He was the pastor of another church in our little suburb of Columbus, one of the mainline denominations. His kids were the same age as my kids. He and Diane had been to our house, and we had been to theirs.

The people of the town thought well of Roger. He was, all agreed, a nice guy. A very nice guy. He was kind and soft spoken and always eager to please. He was generous and agreeable and deferential to others. In fact, he was deferential to just about everyone.

Once when Jean and I were riding to somewhere with Roger and Diane, and Roger was driving, he stopped so abruptly to let someone out of a side street that, had we not been wearing seatbelts, we might have ended up in the front seat. And he did this several times. Jean and I would look at each other and roll our eyes but no one ever got angry with Roger. It was just Roger being nice. Maybe too nice, sometimes, but how could you be mad at someone like that?

When a new minister moved into town, I offered to give him a ride to the ministerial association meeting. Afterward, we decided to stop for lunch, and I remember him leaning across the table and quietly asking me, "So, what's the deal with Roger?" I asked what he meant, and he said, "Is he for real? I mean, can anybody really be that nice?"

Roger avoided controversy at all costs. He didn't want anyone to get upset. When we did our annual pulpit exchange, he would not agree to it until he got his church council to approve of the guest preacher. Roger was, as I said, deferential, careful, cautious and eager to please. He needed everyone to be happy, all the time.

So, it came as some surprise to the rest of us when Roger announced at the Ministerial Association meeting that his church council had refused to renew his contract. They had told him that, after nine years of his leadership, they thought it was time to make a change. That was church talk for, he was being fired.

We commiserated with him and told him how sorry we were to hear that. It's a sad and difficult thing to be rejected by a church into which you have poured your life's blood for so many years. But we assured him, we knew he would land on his feet. Had he begun sending out his resume? Had he contacted the denominational office to begin the search process?

He assured us that he had, and at the next meeting, he reported that he had had three interviews but none of them had panned out. Everyone, it seemed, was looking for a young minister who could attract young people to the church.

The following month, the same. More interviews but no offers.

Finally, after four months of interviews Roger was offered a position at a small, rural church about 70 miles away from the town he and his family lived in. The salary would be less than he was making now, just above the minimum the denomination required for a full-time pastor. He would begin in three weeks.

We later learned that when he got the offer from the church, he went home relieved if not excited and shared the news with Diane. Diane waited until the next morning to tell him that she had no intention of leaving her job (she was a teacher in a nearby school district). She had not supported and encouraged and helped him in his career all these years so she could go backwards, quitting her job that she loved and moving to the sticks.

And what was more, if Roger insisted on accepting the position at that church, she would leave him. I guess this argument went on and on, back and forth, for several days and then, one day, Diane came home from her teaching job and found Roger sitting in his car in the garage, the motor running.

He had taken his own life.

There was a brief note. He apologized profusely for the trouble he knew this would cause Diane and their children, but he was confident that, eventually, they would all come to realize that they were better off without him in their lives. He said he had tried, really tried to be a good person his whole life, only to be rejected by his church, several other churches to which he had applied, and now by his wife. His heart was broken, his disappointment was just too painful to bear.

Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he call me? Come to me? Talk to me? I had no idea things were that bad for him. Why didn't he trust me? Every minister in our little group said the same thing. But we knew that depression can cloud the mind and fog perception. When you're depressed, you're thinking apparatus gets stuck in one gear, and you can't shift into another.

After the funeral, we got together for coffee. Roger, we agreed, had worked harder than anyone we knew to be a good, nice person and he expected the world to reciprocate. He expected life to be good and nice in return. And when it wasn't, that realization was just too much for him to handle.

That's what expectations will do, brothers and sisters. They will inevitably lead to disappointment and when disappointment enters the picture, despair usually follows. And with despair, someone always gets hurt.

MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS

The gospel lesson for this morning opens with this line: "As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John [the Baptizer] whether he might be the messiah."

The Jews did not always expect and hope for a messiah.

What scholars call “the messianic expectation” among Jews began during the Second Temple period, after the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon in about 516 BCE and rebuilt the temple up until the destruction of that temple by the Romans in 70CE.

This period saw the rise of various Jewish sects and movements, each with their own interpretations of messianic prophecies found in the Hebrew Bible. The writings of the prophets of that time contain references to a future anointed leader (the Messiah) who would bring peace and justice and restore the monarchy founded by King David. These prophecies laid the foundation for the Jewish belief in a coming Messiah.

Other writings, including those from Isaiah, seem to indicate a belief that the messiah was not an individual but the nation of Israel whose suffering paid the price of salvation for all mankind.

That’s the problem with prophecy; it must be interpreted and applied to the present time and place. And, as a rabbi friend of mine once said, “Ask three Jews and you’ll get four opinions.” There was a sort of vague expectation that there would be a messiah, but no one could agree on what exactly they should expect.

Most thought that the messiah would descend from the family of David and rise to take the throne, raise an army, and throw off Roman and, indeed, all oppression. Under this messiah Judah and Israel would unite and become a world power.

Some believed that the coming messiah would be a rabbinical figure, a teacher who would come and teach the people a better way of living and believing, a more authentic way to be Jews in the world.

Still others believed that the messiah would be a pastoral person, someone who came and led the people with a warm, calm, and quiet hand, who ministered to them with a word and a gesture, who walked the quiet path and lived the peaceful life.

And, as I said, some believed that the messiah would not be a single, individual person but the entire nation of Juda/Israel who had suffered on behalf of the world and, some went on to believe, would now rise and throw off the bonds of Roman oppression. These latter were often called Zealots because of the militant zeal they brought to their beliefs and arguments.

And finally, around 35 C.E. or so, another sect emerged, one that called themselves “The Way.” They believed that the Messiah for whom all had hoped and longed the past 600 years was no other than a carpenter and itinerant rabbi/teacher/healer from Nazareth, a guy named Jesus.

This Jesus, they said, had lived among them. They had witnessed his power to heal the sick and the disabled, to look into a person’s soul and know things about them that they barely

knew themselves. He spoke not of armed conflict, of violence, and hate but of love, of forgiveness, of justice and of peace.

This Jesus, they said, had suffered and died at the hands of the Romans just as Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would and after three days he had risen from his grave and his close followers and disciples had witnessed all of this first hand.

When some wondered in today's gospel lesson whether John the Baptizer might be the Messiah, it was to this Jesus that John referred when he predicted that, "...one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals."

And, of course, no one believed him. Well, okay, a few did, but not many. Not at first.

ONLY ONE

We shake our heads and look down our noses at those early skeptics. What was wrong with them, we ask. How could they not see that this man, Jesus, was the Messiah they were all expecting and waiting for? How could they be so blind?

But see, they had these expectations and he didn't fit into them. He isn't what they expected. He wasn't Messiah-y enough for them. Okay, he was a descendant of David but where was his crown, his sword, his army? And what was his message? Love? Forgiveness? Really? Please. What kind of leader ever got anywhere by promoting things like that?

Better we should follow the Essenes, they said. They live the ascetic life out by the Dead Sea, the simple, minimalist existence, studying scripture and praying all day.

Or maybe the messiah is to be found among the temple priests with their political power, their clever manipulations of the Romans and the local despots like Herod Antipas and his brother, Philip.

Or maybe he was one of the Sicari, Zealot extremists who carried thin, razor-sharp knives hidden in their sleeves, silently killing Romans and Roman sympathizers in broad daylight.

Or maybe we should follow the Zealots who are raising an underground army to one day rise and overthrow the Romans. Maybe the next messiah won't come from the house of David but from the family of the Maccabees who led a revolution that lasted 200 years

That was how the messianic expectations of the early first-century Jews were expressed. Constantly hunting, hoping, longing for someone who would come and save them from their miserable, downtrodden existence. And, brothers and sisters, that is not unlike how the messianic hope and expectation is still being expressed, not among the Jews but among everyday Americans right now, in 21st century America.

We say we want leaders, but we don't want leaders so much as messiahs. We want someone to save us, to assure us that we are right, to ease our pain, to reassure us against our fears,

to warm our hearts and protect us from those who would steal what we hold most dear – our jobs, our families, our retirements, our freedoms.

When we go to vote. Maybe this guy is the one. Maybe his four tours of duty in the military have prepared him to protect and serve us. Or maybe it's this guy. He was a successful businessman and surely his business success will equip him to run the government to our advantage. Or maybe this woman who extolls the womanly virtues of marriage, family, and children. Surely her values are the same as mine and she will protect them when it comes time to craft policies and laws.

When we look for a job. Maybe this is the one, the job that will provide everything I need for the rest of my life. Not just money but prestige and a sense of pride and achievement. Surely this job will save me.

When we hire a pastor. This one is surely the one. He's young and handsome and articulate and conservative and, most importantly, male! And straight and white. Yes, he'll bring in new, young, wealthy people who will stop the slide in attendance and giving. Yes, everything will be great when he takes our pulpit. Surely, he will save us.

When we pastors agree to pastor a church. Yes, this is the one. This is the church where I'll serve for the rest of my life. Where there are never any disagreements or arguments or hurt feelings. This is the church where I'll always be respected and everyone will always agree with me, where I'll be generously paid and always affirmed in everything I do. Where everyone will always be...nice. Surely, this church will save my career, save me.

Brothers and sisters, I dare say that there is a messianic expectation built into nearly everything we do. The cars we buy, the houses we choose to live in, the person we marry, the children we raise, the town we choose to live in... we're always looking for the one that will save us, that will fill our lives with meaning and authenticity.

And yet, we know, that these messianic expectations of ours are all bound to lead to disappointment and disappointment leads to despair and despair leads to self-destruction.

Why? Why do our messianic expectations always lead to disappointment? Well, because there is only one Messiah.

Just. One. Messiah. And his name is Jesus.

Other things may feel good. They may give us a sense of momentary happiness. But only one thing can save us, can make our lives purposeful and authentic and joyful. Only one thing, one person can lead us on the path that gives us goals that are worth achieving.

And his name is Jesus. AMEN