

“Great Expectations”

Have you ever been communicating with someone, it may have been in writing, or on the phone – and you really hit it off with them. You are both completely “in sync” about so many things – and then you arrange to meet in person. Your mind races because you really don't know what to expect – what does he or she really look like? On the other end that person is probably doing the very same thing.

Having spent over 30 years on the radio – I spoke with so many listeners who would call in and keep me company on the phone during a lonely overnight, midnight to six AM – or maybe they just called to ask for a song to be played, or to make a comment about something that you just said on the air.

It is really funny because if I was making a personal appearance, or hosting an oldies show in some theatre or arena, at a remote broadcast – doing my show out in the public rather than in the studio – I would often meet the people who have been calling – and have that really nice voice – who sounded like a million bucks – but was often something far less than expected. It is funny how we build up great expectations over something or someone and can find out sometimes that those expectations really miss the mark! Oh, I have heard it the other way as well – people might say – you are not at all what I expected! It's funny sometimes the voice on the radio is quite often not at all what you expected.

In the time of Jesus – people held great expectations of what the Messiah would be like, and in some ways, the Jews are still holding those expectations as they await their Messiah. John the Baptist had been foretold about by the Prophet Isaiah as the one who would come before the Messiah, preparing the people to recognize him and listen to him.

In today's Holy Gospel, John the Baptist is in prison awaiting execution by Herod because of John's fiery preaching and his criticism and denunciation of Herod for marrying his brother's ex-wife. John had been preaching that God's kingdom and God's true king were on the way. John suggested to the people that Herod was not the real king and that God would replace him. John held great expectations for Jesus, who he declared as the Lamb of God. He, like many other Jews were expecting an “Elijah like” person to sweep through Israel like Elijah did when he took on the prophets of Baal. The people were hoping that the Messiah would confront Herod and the Romans, freeing the people from the terrible rule they were under. I have to wonder what his reaction may have been when he heard that Jesus was instead in the company of tax collectors and sinners – people who the Jews saw as outsiders – and who were not keeping Torah properly. Jesus had instead come and taken on life as a human - to confront sin and death – and the rule of Satan rather than the Romans. Because Jesus was not confronting the rule of Herod, John sent his followers to ask Jesus “*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*”(Matthew 11:3) John knew who Jesus was from his mother's womb –when he leapt for joy in the presence of the Messiah – who was 6 months younger in Mary's womb. When John grew up it was the culture that crept in and he was beginning to wonder about Jesus “*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*”(Matthew 11:3)

Remember that John the Baptist was the son of a priest named Zachariah who said this of his son John *"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."* (Luke 1:76-79) The Gospel of Luke tells us of John *"and the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."* (Luke 1:80)

John was groomed to expect and prepare for the Messiah, and it is believed that he studied with the Essene, a group of Jewish people who withdrew from the Temple in Jerusalem and sequestered themselves by the Dead Sea at Qumran. The Essene have been known for studying the work of the Prophet Isaiah and so Jesus responded to these followers of John the Baptist with words from Isaiah chapter 61, referring to the deaf, the lame, the dead and the good news. In doing so Jesus reminded them of these words that He had read in the Synagogue in Nazareth, unrolling the scroll: *"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor "* (Isaiah 61:1-2) Jesus was reminding John and his followers of the mission that He was sent to earth for – not to expect what would happen in Jesus's second coming: *"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."* (Isaiah 35:4-6) Jesus wasn't thinking of being like Elijah calling down fire from heaven – instead Our Lord was prepared to do battle in a different way, this time – and would finish Satan off when He would come again -when God's people would be set free at last!

As John's disciples were leaving Jesus' presence, Jesus called out to them to ask them what their expectations were of John in the wilderness. He asked them: *"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."* Jesus wanted to know what their expectations were. Were they really expecting a man in camel's hair and a leather belt? Jesus reminds them what Isaiah prophesied about John in his forewarnings calling him *"A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." ⁹ You who bring good*

tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You, who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"" (Isiah 40:3-9) These prophesy not only about John but also about Jesus. The people were not only expecting their Messiah to come, but for Elijah to come before him in preparation – sort of like his public relations man.

Do you remember the Transfiguration - when Jesus took Peter, James and John to the top of what is believed to be Mount Hermon? He was transformed before them into His heavenly body, flanked by Moses and Elijah, meaning that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law – as represented by Moses, and the Prophets represented by Elijah. Right after this happened, the apostles asked Jesus about the prophesy regarding Elijah coming before the Messiah, and Jesus told them: *"Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."* ¹³*Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.*" (Matthew 17:12-13) In saying this, Jesus was telling them the truth that He is the One who comes after - the Messiah. Jesus is really telling His listeners that the long history of Israel, from Abraham and Moses through the prophets has been one long time of preparation. Jesus isn't just telling people about John, but He is also telling people about Himself. The Jews in Jesus' time were expecting a warrior king, and Elijah to come before Him. John did not meet their expectations and for many, Jesus didn't either.

So let me ask you, what was the message of John the Baptist? Besides – *"You Brood of vipers! His message was "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."* (Matthew 3:2) And then what is the message of Jesus? Simply this - He explained it all in speaking to a Pharisee *"named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council"* (John 3:1) who came to speak with Jesus at night, for fear of being discovered by the other Pharisees. Jesus explained His mission very simply – and why He was sent. He told Nicodemus *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* That is where most people stop. Jesus revealed more to Nicodemus more about the Messiah. He said *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."* (Joh 3:16-18) You see why most people stop after verse 16? Because John 3:17 and 18 tell us the truth. The truth that we heard, that Jesus told His Disciples on the night before He died; that He was *"the way, the truth and the life"* (John 14:6) and that no one come to the Father except through Him. As John the Baptist told people to repent – to change their behavior and turn away from their sins, Jesus simply tells people to believe! *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Jesus was saying to the followers of John the Baptist not to rely on their expectations, but to accept Him just as they accepted John the Baptist, who was nothing at all like Elijah, but he was a prophet, actually more than a prophet. No matter what John or they were expecting of

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the Messiah – they should accept Him and believe – for the Messiah, the Lamb of God was standing right in front of them. We should stop trying to fit God and Jesus into our “great expectations” but instead we need to accept, have faith and believe.