

Matthew 11:2-11

Advent 3, December 14 & 15, 2025

Christmas is a season overflowing with expectations.

- We expect the tree to look perfect.
- We expect family gatherings to be peaceful—filled with smiles, laughter, and kind words.
- We expect the children to behave, the relatives to get along, the gifts to please everyone, and our traditions to unfold exactly as we imagine.
- We expect the Christmas meal to come together just like something out of a Hallmark movie.

But expectations have a way of being broken, don't they?

- The tree dries out, needles cover the floor, and half a string of lights mysteriously stops working.
- Families argue. Even on Christmas, words are spoken that leave lasting wounds.
- Gifts disappoint.
- Grief still aches because someone dearly loved is no longer there.
- Loneliness doesn't vanish just because the calendar reads "December."
- And sometimes, the Christmas season feels far less like a Hallmark movie and far more like John the Baptist's prison cell.

Expectations versus reality—haven't we all felt the sting when the two don't line up? We've all experienced the disappointment of expectations that don't turn out the way we hoped. And into that tension steps John with his honest question: **"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"** It's a sincere question, and it makes sense in the context. John had seen the heavens open at the Jordan River. He had watched the Spirit descend like a dove on Jesus. He heard the Father's voice: **"This is my Son whom I love."** Jesus Himself would later call John the **"Elijah"** who was to come. And yet, despite all of that, there John sat—locked in a prison cell, awaiting execution. One day, he was preparing the way for Jesus. The next day, he is in jail. As the days, would go from days to weeks, he finds himself rotting away in prison. *This isn't the way it was supposed to go.* From where he sat, John could see what God and His Messiah were not doing. And even the greatest born of a woman felt the weight of doubt: **"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

As we look at this reading, we see how deeply it speaks to every one of us. We all have chapters in our lives that resemble John's. How does our faith hold up when life suddenly veers off course? "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" That question quietly surfaces in the hearts of God's people whenever we suffer while trying to remain faithful. At some point—often more than once—we reach moments when it feels as though Jesus isn't making everything better. The tears remain. The fears linger. The valleys stay dark. And that is exactly why John's question matters so much: he was willing to say out loud what many of us have thought but never dared to speak.

Why was John so filled with doubt? Look at John in Scripture. He was a fiery preacher. He wasn't like anyone else in his day. He wore camel hair clothes and ate grasshoppers and honey. He knew that he was the one who would get people ready to meet and hear their Savior speak. John had called the Jewish leaders: **"You brood of vipers!"** He spoke about **"the coming wrath."** **"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."** Jesus was coming to **"gather his wheat into the barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** He knew he was the very forerunner of the Savior, the one promised by God who came in the spirit and power of Elijah. But now he asks, **"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

As John sat in that dark prison, another kind of darkness settled over his soul. What was God's plan for him now? He had always known that once Jesus stepped onto the scene, he himself would fade into the background—but he hadn't expected his role to end so abruptly. John would never leave that prison. And from the reports he received as he suffering there, Jesus didn't seem to be doing what John had anticipated. Jesus wasn't cutting down the trees or burning up the chaff. Instead, John kept hearing about Jesus loving people—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching forgiveness and prayer, urging people not to worry. Jesus didn't seem to be matching the expectations John had preached. What John saw and heard simply didn't align with what he expected. He would never see Jesus go to the cross for him, and he would never hear the joyful news of the resurrection.

How does Jesus help us? And how did He help John? Just look at His reply to John's question: **"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."** In other words, Jesus directs John to expect the *right* things. The very prophecies spoken about the Messiah in the Old Testament were being fulfilled before their eyes. And those same prophecies also made it clear that violence would be directed against God and His people. Just one verse after our reading, Jesus says, **"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it."** The world would seize Him by force—and it still tries to. Like the disciples who were left afraid and hiding, we often find ourselves feeling around in the dark, trying to understand what seems like an upside-down way of ruling heaven and earth. So, Jesus teaches us: *expect opposition, and expect struggles.*

But the resurrection is coming. John's and ours. That is the promise that Jesus proclaims to the faithful as they suffer. He names what He was doing:

- the blind were seeing,
- the lame were walking,
- the sick were being healed,
- the deaf were hearing,
- and the dead were rising.
- And the poor? Well, the poor were receiving good news. They would hear the good news of Jesus Christ and his resurrection.

I wonder how John received the message Jesus sent back with his disciples. Did it comfort him? Did it leave him with more questions? Did it give him strength to endure, or move him to cry out all the more? Matthew doesn't tell us. And the very absence of an answer reminds us what it means to live by faith. Like John, we often find ourselves in uncomfortable, uncertain places. Yet we live by the testimony of those who saw, heard, and touched the Word made flesh. We live—and we wait. We wait for the final resurrection, when Jesus will restore us and make all things new.

After all, Jesus has a way of doing the unexpected.

- No one expected the King of kings to be born in a humble manger.
- No one expected the Savior to come from a poor couple in Nazareth.
- No one expected the Messiah to grow up quietly, preach mercy, heal the broken, and welcome sinners.
- No one expected the Redeemer to save the world—not by overthrowing Rome, but by dying on a cross.

God did not come the way people expected. God came the way people truly needed. Christmas may not turn out exactly as you imagine. Yet, we can take comfort in the One who removes all doubt and promises to bring us into His eternal presence. Let that expectation fill your heart with joy. Amen.