

Matthew 11:2-11

Waiting for Joy!

Sunday December 18th, 2022

This Advent season I have spoken of “waiting” in terms of “service” as in a “waitress waiting on tables.” Waiting, in terms of serving is what we Christians do as we wait on Hope, Peace, Joy and Love to arrive. Waiting, for Christians, is a very active endeavor.

The question is “How do you wait for Joy?” How do you “serve towards” Joy? I believe Joy is a deeper form of happiness. Joy, I believe, is what we experience in the sorrows and tragedies of life. It’s a sense of contentment though the world falls down around you. I believe we build towards joy with smaller acts of love and service that culminate in Joy!

One way to think of this is in terms of pregnancy, which is very much a part of the Advent season as we wait for the birth of the Messiah. Mothers seek to do many little things to assure the healthy birth of their child. They exercise. They avoid alcohol. They take folic acid and vitamins.

And some eat the strangest things that they think are healthy for the development of their child. Each little individual act of love for their child issues, most often, in the birth of a healthy child. It issues in Joy!

For many if not most people the Advent/Christmas season in America is the happiest time of the year. It’s a joyful time. But there is an element of Christmas that can steal that joy and that is unmet expectations. And we have unmet expectations at other times of the year too. Life can be filled with unmet expectations.

When we count on our expectations being fulfilled to lead us to happiness and joy, we are often disappointed. How do you overcome unmet expectations of life, love, and God that steal joy? How do you avoid the trap of false expectations that cause you to fall away from God and faith? Here are several people that list their wants that soon become unmet expectations. How do we overcome our expectations?

ROLL "I WANT"

What do we do? We often have false expectations of Jesus, and these can lead us into depression and doubt the exact opposites of joy and happiness. We see this in the question of John the Baptist to Jesus in our scripture today.

Today we doubt politics, our government, our economy. We doubt our faith, our church. We live in a society, that as many look back, they say, "This isn't the way it was and I don't like the way we are going. Where is God in all of this?" We live in a time of turmoil and uneasy doubt as John did as he sat in prison.

Think about this, John the Baptist too had his doubts. He had his doubts, even though, he had seen the heavens open up, and the Spirit of God descend on Jesus at his baptism. He heard God say to Jesus, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him." John had said to his disciples, referring to Jesus, "Look, here is the Lamb of God."

John the Baptist had all these wonderful, powerful spiritual experiences with Jesus and yet, because Jesus did not meet his exact expectations, he had his doubts that were expressed in the question delivered by his disciples, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

So how can we possibly overcome our expectations and hold onto our faith and joy if John had these amazing experiences and still had his doubts that caused him to question the core purpose for his being?

Today I will share with you 4 things that God has given us to hold onto our faith and joy. And we begin with John, because in the end he did find out how to hold onto his faith.



From his cell in prison, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus that question. I wonder if John was thinking, “If Jesus is not who I thought he was, then who am I? And is the Kingdom of God not near?”

We all have self-doubt. We doubt when our expectations of the object of our faith are not met; so, what did John do?

John didn’t just sink in despair to the floor of his prison cell; John went directly to Jesus with his doubts, despair, and disappointments. Remember, **“waiting” for people of faith is an active pursuit**, not passive. John’s example of dealing with his doubts and despair is one you and I should take. In fact, in terms of my message today, it is the first thing we need to do to overcome our unmet expectations.

#1 To wait on Joy, turn to Jesus with our unmet expectations.

When our expectations in life are not met; when God and our faith seem to fail us, we must turn to Jesus like John did. We must not turn away from Jesus in doubt, despair, and anger, but we must turn to Jesus!

I believe that John’s doubts sprang from the same sources that our doubts spring from: unmet or unfulfilled expectations. Despite all his great and glorious spiritual experiences with Jesus, John’s expectations of Jesus still really went unfulfilled.

You see John and Jesus preached the same message **“Repent the Kingdom of God is near.”** Matt. 3:2 & Matt. 4:17 But John would finish that gospel message, that good news by saying, “If you don’t repent, God is going to **“burn you with unquenchable fire.”**

Jesus, in fulfillment of prophecy, would complete that gospel message, with the good news that **if you repent you will receive eternal life.**

He brought healing to the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dead and the poor!!! He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that was read today. So, despite all this, John’s expectations weren’t met. No one caught fire.

Jesus did not fulfill John's expectation of a fiery judge bringing judgment. And Jesus wasn't a nationalistic leader brought in by God to overthrow the Romans and get rid of Herod who imprisoned John.

And finally, John was in prison. Not exactly the place to be expected for the one called and prophesied to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Couldn't the Messiah break him out???

We often have to go through the valley of the shadow of death to find the happiness and joy of the Lord. James 1:2-4 states this, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

John was physically in prison, but sadly his mind was also in prison as he held wrong expectations of who Jesus was, and what he was going to do. That's how we all wind up prisoners to our doubts, our false expectations of God.

And when we are imprisoned by our doubts or the circumstances of our lives, we can either grow "Bitter or Better". We can turn to Jesus with our wonderment, pain, doubts, and questions as John did; or we can turn away in despair, and our lives will go from bad to worse to bitterness.

Over the last 42 years I have been in ministry, I have seen and participated in the lives of people who have gone through horrible tragedies: suicides, drug addicted children, the slow agonizing death of loved ones.

I must bluntly say, those who turned to God in the midst of their blinding pain and doubt, when their expectations of life and God's providence were crushed, are better today than those who turned

bitterly away. They have found the Joy of life and faith that has been sorely and bitterly tested, but they were found true!

Remember, right here in this scripture Jesus promised, **“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”** NIV version. Or as the CEB version says, **“Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”**

And it’s ok to get mad at God, and shake your fist at God and cry out like Jesus on the cross, **“My God, my God why have you forsaken me.”** as he quoted psalm 22, when our expectations go unmet.

But in the end, we need to turn Jesus, like John did, like Jesus did on the cross when at the end he said to God, **“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”**

We need to bring to Jesus our hurt, our pain our disappointments, our despair, and doubts. We need to lay these at His feet and wait until His healing grace comes. We must remember the words of that old Gospel song *“What a Friend We Have In Jesus”* say,

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!*

*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

We need to trust that God’s wisdom is far beyond our own! The Upper Room Devotional in our bulletin from December 8th reminds us of this. Jesus does not conform to popular expectations and doesn’t conform to our mistaken expectations. But Jesus will bless us if we hang on and **“do not fall away.”**

Now in verses 7-10 Jesus addresses the crowd’s expectations, for as misguided as John’s were about Jesus, so too were the crowds’ expectations of John who now sat in prison.

Jesus reminds them they didn't go out to the Jordan River to see the reeds growing, or the 3 palaces of Herod that were built there, one of which imprisoned John. They went there to see a prophet and yet Jesus affirms John was more than a prophet, "He was my messenger sent ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you.'

Jesus affirmed John's calling and Jesus will affirm yours when you bring your doubts and broken unmet expectations to him.

So don't look elsewhere when you need to overcome expectations look to Jesus. If you are in a prison because of the painful circumstance of your life turn to Jesus.

Now the #2 way to wait on joy and overcome expectations is to live life with "expectancy" not "expectations".

Dr. Randy Carlson President of Intentional Living and Family Life Radio in one of his talks said this, "Expectation - reality = level of disappointment." Let me explain.

When in life we have false or unrealistic expectations for life, God and Church, the degree to which those expectations are not met leaves us with the level of disappointment we feel. That is why for some Christmas is a sad time of the year. We don't get our wants!

When we live life, though, with expectancy, the attitude that good things will come from God, that from the pain we experience in life God will bring good, then we are saved through and from doubt and despair. We wake up each day giving thanks to God for what we have, not what is missing or slipping away. We look for God in the small and the beautiful things and God does not disappoint us.

In one of the Huddle Groups, I started, one night one of the participants said they had been amazed at the unusual and constant communication with God they had experienced through what they have learned. They face each day now with the expectancy, that God will speak, and they will hear because they have learned to listen.

They do this by constantly asking and answering the two questions I end most of my sermons with, “**What is God saying to me? What am I going to do about it?**” These bring an awareness of God and an expectancy that God is going to speak. There is not an expectation of what God will say, but that he will speak.

Now **#3 is that we wait on Jesus by dying for him daily.** In a life of service a disciple finds meaning. It is how we wait on Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. A disciple is a person who models their life after Jesus and here is what Gregory of Nazianzus wrote about Jesus in 381 AD.

Jesus began life hungry, but was the bread of life.

Jesus ended his life thirsty, but was the living water.

Jesus was weary, and yet he is our rest.

He was brought as the Lamb to slaughter, yet he is the Good Shepherd.

Jesus died, but destroyed the power of death.

Jesus suffered and sacrificed on our behalf. Jesus by example calls us into a life of sacrifice and service for others. It's how we wait. When we step into that lifestyle, the pain we suffer, the broken expectations we have, they become opportunities for God to work. God's power is displayed and perfected in our weakness.

I watched a video once about a pastor who had served his local church for decades and found out he had incurable cancer that was rapidly progressing. I will always remember what he told his congregation. “**I have spent years telling you and showing you how to live. I will now show you how to die.**” Jesus said whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

#4 We wait for Joy by holding firmly onto the promises of Jesus. Often life, faith, pastors, churches, and God do not meet our expectations. It is in these times that we must hold firmly onto the promises of Jesus. All in life may be taken away. We may lose our health, our life, our family, our loved ones, and our church in this life, but we will never lose the promises of Jesus. We will never lose our place in the Kingdom of God. That is ultimate Joy!

In verse 11 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

My friends, this is a great promise for you and for me. We hold a place, be it ever so humble and small, in the Kingdom of Heaven and that place makes us greater than John the Baptist. Our faith in Jesus despite broken dreams and busted expectations secures for us forever a place near to the heart of God.

In times of doubt and despair we need to remember this and claim Jesus’ promises.

So, in the end to secure Joy and overcome broken expectations because of the trials of life:

#1 turn to Jesus,

#2 live life with “expectancy” not “expectations”,

#3 know that in sacrifice/service there is meaning

#4 hold firmly onto the promises of God.

What is God saying to you? And what are you going to do?

In Jesus name. Amen!!!