

What Do You Expect?

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Crossroads Christian Church

John 1:6-8, 19-28 December 7, 2014 Advent 2B

What do you expect for Christmas? At Christmas? Of Christmas? We've a week and a half to go, and we all have our lists—lists of what we want, shopping lists, grocery lists, to-do lists. And we all have expectations of one kind or another—presents under the tree, visits from Santa, family members coming home, Christmas Eve worship, and maybe a luscious baked ham or turkey.

Or maybe you face Christmas with negative expectations. It's always difficult to deal with separation, illness, death, or loss during the Christmas season. Some of us remember losses of our own at this time of year. There are other downsides of Christmas, too—way too much work to do, office parties that maybe you don't enjoy, and mounting charge card bills. For many of us, the Christmas season brings pain along with the joy.

What do you expect for Christmas? When I was 12, I really, really, really wanted a toy printing press, with letter blocks made of rubber that you slid into little troughs with tweezers, then you mounted the troughs onto a drum, then you turned the crank to print your own—well, whatever a 12 year old boy could think of to print. Little did I know that I would grow up to be in religious publishing for over 20 years. Anyway, I really wanted that little press, I expected it, I needed it. It was expensive and we were poor, and I had agreed that if we got that, I wouldn't need any more presents. Every day I thought about it. Then, one day in my grandmother's closet, I discovered a big box—the same size and shape as the box for the printing press. It was covered with plain white wrapping paper. I stretched the paper thin, and I could see the name and picture of my printing press on the box underneath.

Instead of feeling excited, I was crushed. First, I felt guilty. But more importantly, I lost that sense of anticipation, all that sense of mystery and surprise, which leads up to Christmas for a child. I had skipped Advent, the time of waiting, the time of longing, the time of anticipation, and went right to Christmas. And so Christmas itself was almost a letdown. My gift had lost its luster.

What do you expect from God? Our words from Isaiah 61 were written to a people who had just returned home from exile. They had dreamed for years about doing just that, and finally their dreams had come true. It was a long journey home, and when they got home, their own land was in ruins, their city walls torn down, and most important, their temple destroyed. It was discouraging and disheartening. But the Spirit of God was upon Isaiah to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to bring healing to the broken hearted, to bring freedom to the captives, to let the prisoners free, to bring comfort and gladness and praise instead of mourning and tears. These words were so powerful that centuries later, Jesus used them as his own

mission statement when he began his public ministry. These words still bring good news and hope to us today. Sometimes when we hit low points in life, we can connect emotionally to the situation that Isaiah was addressing. We leave school without the diploma. A job ends and we're not sure where life will take us. A life partner leaves or dies and we're alone. A home is lost through foreclosure. We get discouraging news from the doctor. We hit rock bottom emotionally and feel unable to cope. In times like that, we need to hear words like Isaiah's, offering hope and meaning and light.

Like last Sunday, our Gospel reading is about John the Baptist, the one charged with preparing the way in the wilderness, of proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, and of the new age of God. He called people to change their expectations of God, and to change their expectations of themselves. He was sent to testify to God's light, to bear witness to the light of Jesus Christ. Some people had wondered if John were the Messiah himself, or if he were the prophet Elijah, who was to enter in God's new age. And John said no. John defined himself, his role, by saying no—by describing what he was not. I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. So what was he? I am a witness, he said. The Greek word for witness was *martyrios*—one who testifies, one who witnesses, to another. It's no coincidence that the word martyr comes from that word, and no coincidence that John the Baptist would later die a martyr's death. I am a voice, he said, a voice calling out in the wilderness, telling people to prepare the way for someone else. He wasn't the star of the story; he was helping people get ready for the star's entrance. He was pointing the way—not to himself, but to the Messiah. "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

And that's the one who came, Jesus Christ. He's the one we wait for in this Advent season.

What do we expect of God? For many of us, our expectations are too low. We trust God in a general way but—we don't necessarily want to trust God enough to let God be in charge of our lives. Some cynic said, "Blessed are those with low expectations, for they shall not be disappointed." But God, in scripture, again and again tells us to raise our expectations; to raise our trust level; to give ourselves completely and joyfully to the God who gave of himself completely for us. Jesus said, Ask. Seek. Knock. If God keeps track of a sparrow that falls, won't God pay more attention to you and to your needs? I've heard so many people, beset by insurmountable problems, say "I just turned it over to God." They trusted the God of the sparrow, the God of the newborn baby in Bethlehem's stable, to care, to help, to answer. And God did.

I'm not suggesting that God is the cosmic Santa bringing us all the goodies we want, or that God is the cosmic personal secretary smoothing out all the rough spots in life. I'm talking about real trust in God as our

loving parent, who wants to draw us into an ever deeper relationship; who wants to pour out grace so it overflows from our lives. If we don't expect that from God, we won't receive it—we'll not notice the gift on the table, or assume that it isn't for us.

So first of all, God expects us to have high enough expectations that we can receive the gifts that God offers. We mustn't refuse the gift by saying we're not worthy enough. Of course we aren't. We receive the gift because we're needy, not because we deserve it. But once we receive that gift, once we receive that salvation, once we receive that love given at such an infinite price, shouldn't we be grateful? Shouldn't we be willing to love God back. To give back to God some of that love with glad and generous hearts? Shouldn't we want to share God's forgiveness with others, to forgive them as God has forgiven us—just like we pray in the Lord's Prayer? Shouldn't we want to share God's love with others, through words of witness and actions of service? Shouldn't we try to live in loving community, so people here in Metro East can say of us like the people of the first century said of the church "See how they love each other?"

What do you expect for Christmas? Might you be expecting Immanuel—God is with us? Might you be expecting the Good Shepherd, who will lead you besides still waters? Might you be expecting the Savior, the one who will name you and claim you as God's child? Who do you expect? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon