

“For Those Disappointed With Christmas”

“Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?” It has to be one of the most surprising questions Jesus was ever asked. “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?” Given who asks it, it also has to be one of the saddest questions Jesus was ever asked.

Christmas is a time of great expectations. But it is also a time of great disappointment – because of the great expectations! It happens to me nearly every time we sing “Joy to the World.”

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come.”

Yes, joy indeed! The Lord of lords has come! Then we sing the next line:

“Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room ...”

And I realize with much pain that every heart has not yet received the King. Every heart has not yet prepared Him room. Then we sing

“No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.”

“Amen!” I say. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. And then I see sins and sorrow still growing, all over the world ... and in me! Oh, I see the blessings flow! All over the world ... and in me. But too many thorns still infest the ground.

“Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

John the Baptist was given two unique privileges relative to Jesus Christ. First, he was a cousin of Jesus. During their growing years, John and Jesus likely spent a lot of time together. Their families certainly celebrated the Jewish holidays together. And second, John was the last prophet in a long line of prophets who foretold the coming of Messiah. As the last, he was the prophet who got to actually see with his own eyes the One whom all the other prophets longed to see. And he then gets to personally introduce Jesus to the world! With great joy and passion, John spends his adult life pointing to Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of all the prophetic hopes:

“Make ready the way of the Lord!”
“The Kingdom of heaven has come near.”
“He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.”
“Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!”

And then, the surprising, sad, painful question: “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

Did you notice in the text the compliment Jesus pays John? After John asks his question. Not before ... after: “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (11:11). No one great than John! Jesus always means exactly what He says; He is not given to uncritical exaggeration.

No one greater than John.

Greater than Abraham?

Greater than Isaac?

Greater than Jacob, Israel?

Greater than Moses?

Greater than Joshua?

Greater than Samuel?

Greater than David?

Greater than Solomon?

Greater than Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Hosea?

Greater than the greatest of Prophets, Isaiah?

No one greater than John. No one.

“Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

Before Jesus arrived on the scene, John was extremely popular. Large crowds – multiple thousands of people – would throng to hear him preach down by the banks of the Jordan River. When word spread that the Coming One had come, the crowds left John, and flocked to hear Jesus preach. John’s disciples felt badly for him, and expected him to also feel badly. But John declared, “Now this joy of mine has been made full.” Joy ... joy ... made full! “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30). John gave his whole life to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah, the Holy One, the Savior, the Coming One. And when He finally came, and people began following Him, John’s heart overflowed with joy.

But soon the joy turned to doubt. The circumstances of John’s life had changed drastically. In his zeal for God’s justice and holiness, John had challenged the morality of Herod Antipas, one of history’s most powerful and ruthless leaders. Herod has taken to himself his brother’s wife, Herodias. And John dared to confront that powerful politician with his adultery. And dared to call it sin.

Now, when we are confronted with sin, we have two options. One is to own up and repent. The other to silence the voice that pricks the conscience. Herod choose the latter, and threw John in prison. And from that prison cell, John sent a message to Jesus. A surprising message in light of all that John preached and witnessed... painfully short: “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

John had given his all for this Jesus, this Y’shua, this Yahweh-to-the-rescue. But now he wonders if he had been wrong. And he feels awful for the thousands of people he led astray if he is wrong. “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

Ever felt that way? Ever wanted to ask Jesus some form of John’s question?

What went wrong for John? What caused the doubt?

Matthew tells us that while in prison John hears reports about the works of Jesus (11:2). What works? All the works Jesus was doing in the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea. Kingdom works. And what John heard disappointed him. Not that what he heard was bad news. Quite the contrary! The reports were full of good news ... very, very, very good news. Healing of the sick, freeing of the demonized, raising of the dead!

Then what bothered John? Not what Jesus was doing. Though who Jesus was doing it with and for did bother John, as I will show you in a moment. What bothered John was what Jesus was NOT doing. Jesus was not fulfilling John's expectations of what Messiah was to do and how Messiah was to do it. So enthusiasm and joy, give way to disappointment and doubt. "Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?"

Anyone identify with John? With the one of whom Jesus says there is no one greater?

What specifically troubled John? The answer lies on two levels: the theological and the personal. They usually go together. Consider each level separately. And then listen to how Jesus responds.

(1) Consider the theological level of John's disappointment. As we saw last Sunday, John reveals his expectations of Jesus in his preaching. Matthew 3:11: "As for me, I baptize you in and with water. But He Who is coming after me is mightier than I ... He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire." Last Sunday I kept the two together – "the Holy Spirit and fire." For the Holy Spirit is Holy Fire. But it seems that in John's mind they end up being separate. John expects two great moves of the Messiah. Baptize in and with the Holy Spirit. And baptize in and with fire.

According to the Prophets, the Holy Spirit is the greatest gift of "the age to come." The prophet Joel records God's promise for the Messianic Age: "And it will come about that after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all humankind" (2:28). Isaiah records a similar promise: "For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring" (44:3). And the prophets are clear that along with the outpouring of the Spirit all kinds of other blessings would flow: joy, healing, forgiveness, renewal, wholeness, the new birth.

And fire. Fire too is to be a mark of Messiah's coming. Thus, before he records the promise of the Spirit, Joel records God's promise of fire: "Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! . . . For the Day of the Lord is coming; Surely it is near. A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness . . . A fire consumes before them, And behind them a flame burns" (2:1-13). For John, fire was a sign of judgment, a sign of purifying judgment. The Messiah would come to judge the earth (Psalm 96:11-13; 98:7-9). The Messiah would come to destroy all evil and wickedness, and purge the earth of sin and injustice.

So John the Baptist expects his cousin to accomplish two works. Baptize the righteous in and with the Holy Spirit. And baptize the unrighteous in and with fire. Thus the reason why John is troubled. In his mind, these two works are to occur at the same time and all at once.

This is why John warned people to be ready. With great urgency and compassion, John called people to repent, to turn around, to make a U-turn in the road, and prepare for Messiah's arrival. In John's mind a separation was to take place. "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees," he preached (Matthew 3:9). "His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear out His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (3:17)

In John's mind the Messiah comes and immediately effects a radical purging of the world. What an expectation! "No more let sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground." The King would come and destroy all oppression and evil and sin. And then, once the judging and purifying happened, Messiah would pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit.

See why John was disappointed by the reports of Jesus' work? The gift of the Holy Spirit was being poured out before the fire! And ... this is what bothered John the most ... John heard nothing about fire! As William Barclay put it: John expected to hear "the wrath of God is on the march." What he hears is "the mercy of God is here" (*Luke*, 89-90). John heard nothing about judgment in the form of axes, winnowing forks, and burning chaff.

What made things so problematic was that John heard that the people whom he expected to get the axe were the ones with whom the Messiah was eating and drinking! Jesus was keeping company with the chaff! He was pouring out the blessings of the Spirit on the un-righteous!

So John had to send messengers to Jesus asking, "Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?"

(2) But his question was not purely theological. It arises out of his own personal circumstances, the second level of his disappointment. He is in prison! The incongruity of it! The herald of God's Messiah ... imprisoned by the un-righteous Messiah was suppose to destroy!

While in prison, John could hear the music and singing and dancing in the castle above him as Herod and his un-righteous friends were getting drunker and drunker. And the news he heard about Jesus only added insult to injury. For Jesus Himself was holding feasts with drunkards and prostitutes and tax-collectors. Jesus was reaching out to "the very 'chaff' on whom John had called down the fire of God" (George Caird, *Saint Luke*, 112). And John saw no indication that Jesus was moving to free John from jail. Jesus did not seem to "even try to cleanse His threshing floor of such refuse as Antipas and Herodias" (A. Plummer, *Luke*, 202).

John's question is very existential: "If You are the Savior and King Whose arrival I gave my all to announce, why do You leave me in jail?" Anyone identify with John? John is profoundly disappointed theologically because Jesus did not fit into John's presuppositions. And John is profoundly disappointed personally because Jesus was freeing other people but not him.

Such disappointments usually go hand-in-hand. Behind nearly all (not all, but nearly all) theological anguish is personal hurt. Beneath many of the intense religious controversies lie deep emotional wounds touched by the religious issues. So, we wrestle with the affirmation, "Our God reigns," not because there is no evidence of it, but because our personal histories are not going the way we think they should if God reigns. We argue about whether or not Jesus still heals in miraculous ways, not because there is no evidence of such healing, but because He has not healed us or our loved ones in such miraculous ways. We are offended by exuberant worshippers who promise, "Jesus can give you

joy,” not because we fail to see joy in their lives, but because we are not presently experiencing such joy.

John the Baptist’s expectations of the Christ of Christmas were not being fully realized, on both the theological and personal levels. So, he asks, “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?”

Again, ever felt like asking that question of Jesus? A loved for whom you have prayed your heart out dies. You get cancer. You lose your job. Natural calamities wreak havoc. A war you prayed would not happen does. Violence stalks your street, neighbourhood or school. Depression lingers for weeks and weeks.

You have to admire John’s honesty. He had to know, “Are You God’s Messiah, or should we now start searching for another candidate?”

Jesus clearly admires the honesty. And He takes the question seriously, and sends the messengers back to John with a return message. So, now consider Jesus’ response. Jesus answers John on both levels: the theological and the personal.

(1) He addresses the theological first. Matthew tells us that Jesus gives John a report on what He has been up to. Luke adds that just before giving the report, Jesus does more of what John has already heard. Luke adds that in the presence of John’s messengers, “at that very time Jesus cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind” (7:21).

And then Jesus gives His report: “Go and report to John what you see and hear: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:4-5). A theologically loaded report!

Notice that Jesus is not telling John anything new. John has already heard these facts. BUT Jesus is putting it in language that would convey a clear message to John. Jesus ties together key phrases from the prophet Isaiah, who incidentally, is the prophet who foretold the work of John.

Listen to the following lines from Isaiah:

“Say to those with anxious heart,
‘Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.’
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like deer,
And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.” (35:4-6)

“And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book,
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.
The afflicted ones shall increase their gladness in the Lord,
And the needy shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.” (29:18-19)

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And freedom to prisoners.” 61:1.

Jesus takes these phrases from Isaiah and puts them together so that John would get the point: “You can see that I am the Coming One foretold by Isaiah. I am fulfilling the role of Messiah. People are being freed and made whole. But John, I am not playing the role the way you are writing the script.”

The question then is, where did John go wrong? Where were his expectations in error?

Let me summarize it this way. Jesus’ coming in the days of John the Baptist was not the end, as John expected, but the beginning of the end. What do I mean? The Day of the Lord, which John expected, the great and terrible Day as some Prophets put it, still lies in the future. Thus no fire, no axes, no winnowing forks ... yet. But although fire may be conspicuously absent in Jesus’ work, the blessings of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of the Age to come after the Day of the Lord are very present. It is not yet the end, just the beginning of the end. The beginning of the end, which is the beginning of what does not end!

What Jesus has done, which confused John, is stretch out the end times, separating the two aspects of Messiah’s work. He comes first – ahead of the Day of the Lord – baptizing in and with the Holy Spirit, bringing the gifts of the Age to come: peace and joy and healing and deliverance and forgiveness and reconciliation. Then one day, on the Day of the Lord, He will come baptizing with fire, destroying all evil, purging human existence of all sin. John expected both baptisms to occur at the same time and all at once. Jesus does it one at a time, and much slower than John expected.

But He is Who John hoped for. If John could just set aside His preconceived ideas; if he could be open to having his own expectations on Jesus, he would hear Jesus’ clear response to his theological struggle: “I am the Coming One. It is happening ... the beginning of the end is happening. People are being made whole. It is just that I am not playing the role the way you wrote the script.”

(2) Then Jesus addresses John’s personal disappointment. One line. One line we need to hear again and again. “Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me” (11:6). Blessed is she who keeps from stumbling over Me. The word is *scandalon*. Blessed are those who are not scandalized by Me.

It is an invitation to trust. We can paraphrase Jesus: “John, I am aware of how disappointed you are in Me. Given your expectations, I understand. But John, I am asking you to trust Me. Yes, My methods and My timing are not what you hoped for. I know what you have been preaching. And I agree. It is My passion to rid the world of sin and evil and pain and guns and drugs and human trafficking. Hang in there with Me. I know what I am doing. Let Me be Messiah My way. Trust Me.”

It is not a wholly satisfactory answer, is it? But at times it is the only response Jesus can make. Like our expectations for Christmas, our expectations of Him can be off the mark. At such times, He asks us to lay aside our expectations of how and when He should act, and trust Him to be the Saviour in His way and in His time. This is not easy to do, I know! Which is why He pronounces “Blessed” on those who keep from stumbling over His ways and His timing.

But as unsatisfying as His response may seem, it turns out to be the only response that finally satisfies. Why? Because it draws us to Jesus. You see, even if Jesus as Messiah did immediately purge the world of sin and evil we would not yet be whole. We are not whole until we come to Him. Even if Jesus did deliver John from Herod’s prison, John would not yet be whole until he came to Jesus. Even if Jesus Messiah did immediately remove all pain, all sorrow, all sickness; even if He did give us all we ask for; we are not fully alive until we are His, until we belong to Him. We were made BY Him and FOR Him. And we are not all we were meant to be until we are wholly His. He Himself is our wholeness. He Himself is our freedom. He Himself is our joy, our peace, our light, our LIFE.

Jesus’ words, “Blessed are they who do not stumble over Me,” draw us to Himself.

“Are You the Coming One, or should we look for someone else?” John asks the question because He saw no fire and because Jesus was not acting fast enough.

Where is Jesus not fulfilling your expectations? What is the parallel in your life to “no fire”? Where is He moving too slowly for you? The temptation when disappointed with Jesus is to look elsewhere, to find another Saviour, to go after some other source of hope and peace.

But still He calls out: “Trust Me. I understand your confusion. Trust Me. I am the Promised One. I will fulfill all that is promised of Me and by Me. You have to let Me be Who I am on My terms. Blessed is the one who keeps from stumbling over Me being Messiah My way and in My time.”

You have heard the phrase “already, not-yet.” Jesus is already, not-yet. The Promised Messiah has already come, and already begun to fulfill His Messianic work. Indeed, the decisive part of the work is finished: He has already gone to the cross and been raised from the dead! But He is still to come, He is still “not-yet.” There is more to accomplish. He came the first time as suffering Servant. He will come again as the triumphant King. “Already, not-yet.” Already baptizing in and with the Holy Spirit. Not-yet baptizing in and with fire. The complete eradication of evil – not-yet. The total purging of the world of disease, decay, demonic, death – not-yet.

But because of the “already” the “not-yet” will happen. The final outcome is as certain as His birth in the manger. For in the manger the Living God became one of us, forever locking Himself up with humanity. His destiny is now our destiny!

The Christmas Story awakens in us huge expectations. Rightly so! What keeps us from falling into disappointment is remembering what John the Baptist did not seem to get. Christmas is incomplete without Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost and the Second Coming. Christmas is but the first chapter of the Great Story. Nothing compares with the first chapter! “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” But as wonderful as the Christmas chapter is, it is incomplete without all the other chapters.

The purpose of Jesus' birth is incomplete without His earthly life and ministry.
The purpose of His earthly life and ministry is incomplete without His death on the cross.
The purpose of His death on a cross is incomplete without His resurrection from the grave.
The purpose of His resurrection is incomplete without His ascension to the Throne of the Universe.
The purpose of His ascension is incomplete without His pouring out of the Holy Spirit.
And the purpose of His pouring out of the Holy Spirit is incomplete without His coming again in glory.

So, may I suggest how we stay alive in great expectations even when disappointment lurks so close at hand?

We pray "the already":

"Welcome Lord Jesus.
I welcome Your coming into the world.
Keep filling me with Your Holy Spirit.
I give You full access to all of me.
Use me for Your purposes in the world."

And we pray "the not-yet":

"Come, Lord Jesus.
Come again to bring Your work to full completion.
Bring in the new heavens and the new earth."

And we pray "the already, not-yet":

"In the meantime, help me trust You Jesus.
Help me trust You to be Who You are in Your way and in Your time.
Help me not stumble over You."

Amen.