

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
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Great Expectations

The holidays are filled with expectation-- great expectation! We all expect to have a great holiday. With all the work and effort we've put into our preparation, how can we not have the most joyous of holidays? This is how my mom thought every year. She had carefully made her list of presents to buy, cookies to bake, and decorations to hang. She had somehow convinced my dad to help pick out the Christmas tree, which many of you know from last year is not on his list of favorite things. My mom never missed a beat on the holidays. She had dotted her "I"s and crossed her "T"s. She was ready for a fabulous Christmas. But, to tell you the truth, it was never really fabulous or perfect. The holidays never met her expectations. In fact, one year, things just went terribly wrong.

We always hope for a white Christmas. By this, we mean fluffy wet snowflakes that fall like manna from the sky. Not so for this particular year when, instead of a snow shower, we had an ice storm on Christmas Eve. My parents took me and my brother and ventured out to church despite the treacherous drive. So we slipped and slid all the way to the church parking lot where we breathed a sigh of relief that we were all in one piece. And then we opened our doors to get out and my brother slid on the ice like he was sliding into home plate. So he was crying because he slipped on the ice and my parents were anxious the whole time we were worshipping because the ice kept accumulating. The next morning was no better.

So, I had this bizarre little way about me when I was a child. Every time I received a gift I didn't completely fall in love with, I would cry because I felt so guilty that someone had spent their good money on something that I didn't care two bits about. This particular Christmas, I asked for the Olivia Newton John record called "Physical" because I liked the title track. But, when I took a listen to it on Christmas morning, the title track was the only song I liked and thus I began to cry. My parents always found this odd about me and got annoyed rather than sympathetic. They let me wallow in my

puddle of guilt. My brother had an odd way about him too. He would end up breaking every Christmas gift he received, inevitably on Christmas morning. This particular year he received a magna doodle, which was kind of like a glorified etch-a-sketch. When we went to church on Christmas morning, he took his magna doodle to occupy him during the sermon. Somehow, my brother ended up sitting on his magna doodle at church and breaking it. So there you go...my parents had two criers on their hands. One was crying because she doesn't like every song on the Olivia Newton John album and the other was crying because he slid on the ice the previous night and now sat on his magna doodle. And this story gets so much better. So we returned from church in total disarray. My mom, who tried her hardest to make the holiday perfect, just snapped. When my dad, brother, and I got inside the house, my mom remained outside. So we wondered what she was up to. She took the broken magna doodle that was in her hands and threw it on the icy snow. And then she walked up to the porch and got the snow shovel and then proceeded to beat the magna doodle with the shovel. Now, you have to understand, my mom is the most peaceful woman in the world...she is compassionate, controlled, and very organized. This was really bizarre behavior for her. I hadn't seen this side of her before and haven't seen it since. When she finished, she came into the house like nothing ever happened. We joke about this now...how mom beat the magna doodle. But, how many of you are capable of beating a magna doodle around the holidays? By that, I mean, how many of you have your expectations of the holidays shattered into tiny little bits? The magna doodle was symbolic of my mom's expectations which were completely torn down. She was left with this very imperfect holiday...and yet those are the holidays we most fondly remember.

Torn down, shattered expectations. The holidays never met my mom's expectations. In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus is not meeting John's expectations. King Herod has imprisoned John because he was speaking against the monarchy. He was saying that Jesus was the true King and not Herod. He was stirring the pot a little too much and so Herod had him arrested and imprisoned on sedition charges. Our scripture lesson finds John languishing in prison, pondering his forthcoming death, and reflecting on his ministry in the wilderness. He has gotten word from his own disciples about this Jesus who is healing the sick, feeding the poor, and

spreading good news. Wait a second! This wasn't the messiah John had expected. John foresaw someone who would bring fire as in Ezekiel 5:4 "From these, again, you shall take some, throw them into the fire and burn them up." He projected someone who would uproot as in Jeremiah 12:17, "But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says the Lord." John is looking to the Old Testament prophets and picturing a messiah that will bring judgment. But, Jesus isn't bringing judgment. Instead he is bringing redemption, reconciliation, healing, and deliverance. He is fulfilling the promises we read about in Isaiah this morning: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." This is the kingdom of God breaking in with Jesus at its helm.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus does not come out and say who he is? When Jesus is asked "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" he does not say "I am the One" or "I am the Christ...the one who John preached about in the wilderness." Instead Jesus points to his "good works." There is a famous Buddhist saying that applies here. "All instruction is but a finger pointing to the moon; and those who gaze is fixed upon the pointer will never see beyond." So many people had their eyes fixed on Jesus. And not only that, they were seeing Jesus through the eyes of their own expectation...that is, who they expected Jesus to be and what they expected Jesus to do. Jesus does not point to himself but his good works, which point to God.

Clearly we all have expectations for the holidays, but don't we also have expectations for Jesus? When we read about a Jesus who heals in the gospels, don't we expect healing from our ailments? If Jesus healed then, why isn't he healing me now? Jesus fed the hungry, so why are millions of people dying of hunger today? Jesus sought justice for those who were marginalized, so why are people still denied basic human rights? Where is the Jesus of the New Testament miracles? Is this the Jesus we expected?—someone who sits passively by while pain and misery run ramped? If we are asking ourselves these questions, maybe we need to re-envision our expectations. Maybe we need to base our expectations not on who we want our God to be but who our God is. Maybe we need to expect a Jesus who doesn't take away our pain but suffers with us through the suffering and turmoil in our lives. Maybe we need to expect a Jesus who

empowers us to relieve the poverty of this world. Maybe we need to expect a Jesus that plants the seed of hope in even the most unjust of circumstances. Maybe we need to expect a Jesus who will eventually turn our mourning into joy and our wailing into dancing.

Many of you know that I just had a baby. I've learned a bunch of new things by going through the process of having a baby. I'm learning even more now being a new parent. But one of the things I found is that every expectant mother has baby expectations. I certainly did. For example, while I was pregnant, I expected to have a baby that would literally be "a bundle of joy." Now, granted, there are times when I might call Gus a bundle of joy but there are other times I want to call him a bundle of fussiness or a bundle of crabbiness or a bundle of bad smells/odor. My other baby expectations included a baby that would mostly sleep through the night, except for the occasional feeding. Talk about shattered expectations. Gus has gotten up sometimes 4 or 5 times in one night! And here's perhaps the biggest one: I always imagined a healthy baby. You see, I never expected to be in Children's Hospital at 3am in the morning in a drab waiting area because I couldn't bear to watch my baby be poked and prodded by strangers. I never expected to have a meltdown because I was told my baby would have to have a spinal tap. I never expected to be listening to my baby scream in pain and feel absolutely powerless. You see, I never really expected to ever love someone so much—in a way that transcends words.

When we read this passage in Matthew, we automatically think that John the Baptist's shattered expectations of Jesus cause him disappointment. But this time when I re-read this passage, I considered the fact that John's shattered expectations of Jesus perhaps didn't cause him disappointment but excitement and joy. John heard of a messiah that was doing amazingly good things and he wanted confirmation—that this was the messiah he prophesied about. You see the question isn't "Is this (annoyed emphasis) the one we have waited for?" but "Is this (excited emphasis) the one we have waited for?"

And maybe this is our challenge. When Jesus comes to us in ways we didn't expect we should meet that Jesus with joy and excitement instead of disappointment that

God does not fit into the little box we have constructed. That unexpected Jesus will lead us down a far more amazing path than we ever imagined.

I thought parenthood would be difficult but never this difficult. And yet, what gives me comfort is in the unexpected moment when I am up with my baby for the 5th time in one night and he is laying so peacefully on my chest, I realize a depth of love I have never known.

In that unexpected hour may you too feel yourselves wrapped in the warmth of none other than the perfect love of Jesus Christ. Amen.