

Advent 3A 2022 Matthew 11:2-11

Pastor Amanda gifted me an Advent calendar this year—the kind that you count down each day from December 1st through Christmas Eve by opening a door to find a little gift. This particular calendar is rubber ducky themed. If you are at all familiar with rubber duckies, they come in basically two sizes: standard and miniature. But when I saw the size of the calendar, I thought, there's no way that they could fit even miniature sized rubber duckies in this little box, so I expected to find mini-mini, extra-tiny rubber duckies for each day. But on December first, when I opened the first panel, there was a regular miniature sized rubber duck—a green one with snowflakes. He was all folded up, deflated, and smushed into the compartment, but he unfolded and puffed up much bigger than what I thought could fit in that box. So then I was eager to see what 24 Christmas-themed miniature rubber duckies would look like. But on December 2nd, I opened the next compartment and found...a tiny pair of glasses for the first duck. And that has been about how things have gone: some days there is a duck, some days it's a hat or a pair of sunglasses for a duck...and then just when I thought I had the pattern down, one day I did find an extra-tiny, mini-mini duck. And honestly, this is just the sweetest, most whimsical little bit of joy every day, finding a tiny Christmasy something that defies expectation. In Advent, we talk a lot about expectation, but it bears the question: What, exactly, are we expecting?

Today we find ourselves about in the middle of Matthew's gospel, when John the Baptist is in prison, the consequence for having challenged King Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law. In all four gospels, John confidently identifies Jesus as the one whose way he has been sent to prepare: Earlier in Matthew's gospel, John resists baptizing Jesus, because he knows who Jesus is and feels unworthy; in John's gospel, he sees Jesus at a distance and proclaims to his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In Luke's gospel, the fetus John, still in utero, leaps within his mother Elizabeth when she sees Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus—a scene that has inspired some fantastic artwork. But now that he's landed in prison, John begins to wonder of Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It's a reasonable question to ask, because if he had it right, and Jesus indeed was the Messiah, then how could John, the chief member of Jesus' advance team, the one who had pointed the way to Jesus, end up in prison? Shouldn't Jesus be taking over and winning big if he was, in fact, the one who was coming to save Israel?

Jesus sends John's disciples back with the instruction to report to him what they have seen and heard, a testament that Isaiah's prophecy is being fulfilled through his ministry: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. In effect, Jesus asks John, *What*, or

maybe *what else did you expect me to do? I'm doing just what the prophet said would be done.* Jesus hasn't established himself as the rightful King of the Jews and deposed King Herod, the enemy who had unjustly imprisoned John. Jesus hasn't raised an army and fought Pilate's legions, overthrown the government, and ended the Roman occupation. All of the earthly powers from which Israel longed for freedom are still right there. There's a lot John gets right about Jesus, but John, just like everyone else, seems disappointed that Jesus failed to meet certain expectations, even though those were expectations that God never promised to fulfill.

Jesus then turns to the crowds and asks them what they had expected when they went out to the wilderness to see John: Did they expect to see a reed shaken by the wind? This was probably a thinly veiled reference to Herod, since their coins were printed with Herod's emblem of reeds. Likewise someone dressed in soft robes would normally be found in a palace, as Herod would have been. In other words, Jesus asks the crowds, *Why did you go out in the wilderness looking for the very same thing that you would have been able to find right where you were? What good would it do you to find another leader who acted just like all the leaders you already have? Weren't you hoping for something new, something different? If all you wanted was more of the same, someone to speak and act the way everyone else speaks and acts, why did you go looking for anything at all? What did you expect?*

And that question still rings true for us. What do we expect when we come here? Do we expect God to challenge us to do something new and different? Or do we come looking for validation of everything we already think, believe, say, and do? Do we expect our baptism into life in Christ to call us to a new way of living, or do we just want permission to keep on doing things the way we always have? Do we recognize how God chose to establish God's kingdom on earth? Not by some sweeping supernatural intervention, but by joining us in our human experience, including our human suffering? And when becoming truly human, to do so not by being born into a royal family in a palace, but by being born to working-class parents, temporarily displaced from their home? Do we expect to find God still at work through humility, mercy, and loving services? Or do we for some reason expect the God of peace to suddenly embrace violence and war, to switch methods, to require worldly power and wield coercive force, to use all the tactics that Jesus rejected when he was tempted in the wilderness?

Advent trains us to look for the ways in which God's kingdom is breaking into this world, which is the opposite of hoping God's kingdom will turn into a glorified version of what is already not working very well for us. If humanity was pretty close to doing it right, God could have saved the trouble of coming to show us a new and different way. May we be on the lookout for all the ways God invites us into kingdom living, and may we delight in God surprising us by acting in both bigger and smaller ways than what we expect.