

Advent 3A  
Peace, Seattle  
December 11, 2016  
Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 35:1-10

## **EXPECTATIONS AND HOPE**

**Night has fallen**, and in the darkness figures move through the mist with lanterns, searching; calling out the names of the two missing boys.

**This is not the first time. For these two boys are survivors of unspeakable terror.**

And though they are beyond that terror now, and there is no need for them to seek refuge in the night, still the darkness sometimes calls to them.

**And when it calls, they flee, they run, they hide. Until, finally, they are coaxed from out of their hiding place by the familiar voices of friends, and with lights guiding them, they return to the dorm, go back to their beds, safe and sound.**

**This opening scene from the film THE MIRACLE is set in a Kibbutz, a community farm**, in the young nation of Israel five years after the end of World War II. This community is peopled by Jewish teenagers whose parents were killed or lost during the War, along with adult chaperones.

In a quest for normalcy, these young people go about their daily routines, doing their chores, farming the land, forming relationships. They live out their daily lives with a certain soberness, and the fragility of their souls is exposed during the nights as the ghostly images of nighttime raids and concentration camps revisits them.

**Beneath it all, each young person nurses a secret hope: that a lost relative—perhaps even their own mother or father—will appear, and they will be reunited again, and they will have a place, they will have a home, they will have a family once more.**

In the meantime, all they can do as they travel through this wilderness is give themselves to their daily routine, taking each day as it comes.

**This morning our lessons focus on expectations, disappointment, and hope.**

In our first lesson, Isaiah uses his bold pallet once again to show us what happens when God brings springtime to desert lives: a renewed earth springs up from a once barren desert, and a company of wounded humanity—the deaf, dumb, and blind—now fully restored, are booked on a first class journey to the home of their dreams.

From exile, the promise that God will reverse their fortune and lead them homeward breaks through like a burst of bright sunshine on a dreary, gray Northwest morning.

**Here is hope for a people whose failure to live faithfully had cost them everything.**

THE WILDERNESS SHALL BE GLAD, THE DESERT SHALL BLOSSOM  
THE EYES OF THE BLIND SHALL BE OPENED, THE EARS OF THE DEAF UNSTOPPED  
THE LAME SHALL LEAP LIKE A DEER AND THE TONGUE OF THE SPEECHLESS  
SING FOR JOY!

No matter what sort of brokenness they've endured, God will visit them again, bringing healing in his wings.

**Meanwhile, in the gospel, we find John, who's given everything to God's mission, behind bars and struggling with doubt.**

**John, the Forerunner, whose habitat is open space whose calling is to preach his heart out, suddenly finds himself hemmed in by the four walls of a prison cell.**

**Matthew says:**

WHEN JOHN HEARD IN PRISON WHAT JESUS WAS DOING, JOHN SENT DISCIPLES TO ASK HIM, ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME, OR ARE WE SUPPOSED TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?

**John knows that his chances of getting out of prison alive are nil. And he needs to know if his call, his preaching, his life will be vindicated. IS JESUS IT? IS JESUS THE ONE—OR NOT?**

John had clear expectations of what God had sent him to do:

- his job was to set the axe at the root of the tree,
- and the Messiah's job was to pick up where John left off and finish the job.

**As far as John could tell, that wasn't happening. Now, trapped in his prison cell and his uncertainty, John needs to know, is Jesus the One, or not?**

If there's one thing we all have in common, it's knowing disappointment, knowing what it's like not to measure up to the expectations of others or of ourselves.

We experience it as children, and we turn around and inflict it on our own kids. We've all been let down sometime, and we've all let someone else down, too.

We know disappointment in our families, in our communities, and in our nation. This is not new.

The Scriptures are full of examples of God's people, God's covenant nation, falling short of the Lord's expectations; forsaking God's ways, lying, cheating, turning to false gods, trying to deceive or cover-up or find a way around obedience.

Stuck in prison, John begins to wonder whether the man he had baptized at the Jordan was truly God's Messiah. The only answer John will accept is one which comes straight from Jesus' mouth, so John sends disciples to ask point blank: **ARE YOU THE ONE, JESUS?**

**And how does Jesus answer?**

GO TELL JOHN WHAT YOU HEAR AND SEE:

- THE BLIND SEE,
- THE LAME WALK,
- LEPERS ARE CLEANSED,
- THE DEAF HEAR,
- THE DEAD ARE RAISED,
- THE POOR LEARN THAT GOD IS ON THEIR SIDE.

**Lives are being transformed, John, and that's what it's all about!  
God has not abandoned you—neither has God abandoned the world.**  
God's salvation is unfolding. The prophecies of Isaiah are touching down in new ways.

God is entering the broken human story again, taking on flesh and presence in a way as never before.

**In this season of the year**, famous for its high level of unfulfilled expectations, God meets us, as he met John, with the promise that in Jesus our deepest longings for transformation, our deepest yearning for wholeness and community will be satisfied.

**This hope may never take the exact shape we want it to. It may not take the shape we expect. But it will take the shape we need, when we place ourselves in God's trusting hands.**

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**Now, back to our original story at the Kibbutz...**

Living among the young men and women there on the farm is Knut, an elder man from Holland, who has come to help them with the farming tasks. **Knut knows a secret.**

**He knows that something more than fruits and vegetables are needed to sustain life. He knows that in order for a new future to be born, hope most blossom.** And so Knut brings with him from Holland tulip bulbs, which he plants in the dry, unirrigated soil across the hillside on the farm.

**The other farmers think he's crazy, of course.**

There isn't nearly enough rainfall in this arid land to sustain such a crop.

**But Knut knows something they don't.** By surrounding each bulb with small stones, Knut creates a miniature well on which the dew collects and condenses as the temperature falls each night.

**Drop by drop the bulbs are watered by the dew. And in time, they sprout; they send up tender shoots; until finally—wonder of wonders—they blossom.**

**And as they blossom, the miracle of possibility, the miracle of beauty amid the ugliness of violence and genocide; the miracle of joy and hope and future... is made real in the disjointed lives of those young people; an incarnate symbol of hope.**

**Whatever your story might be**, whatever your history of failed expectations, of broken relationships, of woundings and betrayals, bitterness or despair, God is confronting it all, taking it all on in the person of Jesus Christ.

**It is he who has come to walk with us through the pain,**

**He who has come to call us into companionship with one another,**

**He who gathers us as a community of hope around this table, where we eat and drink forgiveness, and where become what we have ingested: the body of Christ for the world.**

Prayer: O God of miracles: in our desert places of fear, confusion, and despair, bring forth the flower of courage, new vision and hope. In the desert places of disease, injustice and grief, bring forth springs of living water to heal, cleanse and revive. In desert places where we wander, lost, make straight our paths and call us home. We ask it as we worship, in the name of the Savior whom we await. Amen.