Sunday, December 17, 1995
MORE THAN EXPECTED
Matthew 11:2-11

Many times throughout our lives, we receive things we do not expect, sometimes more and at other times less. At Christmastime, we've all heard children say, "Is this all I get?" And we've probably thought or said the same thing ourselves: "Is this all I get?" We expected more or something different.

There have also been gifts that I have received which, at the time, I was not aware of their value, but only much later did I come to realize their true worth. As I look back on my childhood and growing up, I realize now that some of the greatest gifts my parents gave me were their time, the security of a loving home, and the feeling that I was loved and accepted, not only by them but by God.

The gift of God coming to us in a human being, which we recall at this time of year, can be more or less than we expect. "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" That was the question bothering John the Baptist as he sat in prison and wondered if he had made a mistake about Jesus. The Messiah was both more and less than he expected.

He had been put in prison because, in his preaching, he had criticized some of the government officials. In jail, he had plenty of time to think, and he kept getting reports about this Jesus whom he had baptized. Although large crowds were following Jesus, what John heard about him didn't match what he expected the Messiah would be and do.

He kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, forgiving sinners, eating with outcasts, going to parties, and preaching good news to the poor. He even heard that Jesus had eaten in the home of a tax collector and that, at a wedding, he had turned water into wine. By some, Jesus was being called a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John languished in prison, he couldn't help wondering, "Did I make a mistake? Is this Jesus the promised Messiah of God? He's certainly not what I expected."

So John sent some of his followers to investigate. They came to Jesus and asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." In other words, you and John have to decide for yourselves whether I am authentic or not on the basis of what is happening.

John the Baptist had different expectations of what the Messiah would be and do. He had described the Savior primarily as a judge who would be stern and demanding. John had threatened his audiences with fire and brimstone. In addition, he had lived an entirely different kind of life than Jesus. He had taken a vow of poverty and lived in the wilderness. He never attended wedding celebrations or ate in the homes of outcasts. He assumed the Savior would follow his pattern.

Like us, John the Baptist was discovering that there is often a wide difference between our idea of a thing and the thing itself. Perhaps you've had the experience of preparing to meet someone you've been expecting, and then when the person arrives and you get to know them,

you are quite surprised and maybe even disappointed because the individual does not fit your preconception of what they would be.

When John's disciples reported back to him the answer that Jesus gave them, the gospel stories do not tell us what his response was. But from later history, we can assume that John changed his assumptions and accepted Jesus as the Savior, even though he was different than he had expected.

But how about us? Most of us have some idea in mind, some picture in our heads, as to the kind of person Jesus was, and we have some concept of who God is. But we always need to be open to the possibility that God is more than we expect. Furthermore, we will never know all there is to know about God or God's revelation in Jesus.

One of the most helpful books ever written on this subject is by J.B. Phillips. Its title is Your God Is Too Small. In this classic, Phillips shows how frequently our ideas of God are inadequate, limited, and parochial, so that if we experience God in a way different from our preconceived notions, we might miss God altogether because we are not prepared to meet God in ways we had not expected. The same is true of Jesus. We have the tendency to keep him pictured in our minds as we would like him to be.

I suspect that one reason our culture loves Christmas so much is because almost everyone loves Jesus as a baby. During this season, we emphasize the baby, and that is part of its inexhaustible pull on the minds and hearts of humanity. But it can also be a liability. Some people become so entranced with the beautiful story of a baby in a manger that they miss the rest of the story. After all, a baby is so harmless, so helpless, so dependent, so vulnerable. It's easy to be charmed by the story of a baby and grow very sentimental about it. It does not require us to do very much about it. The baby in the manger does not demand much in our way of thinking and acting.

There's the tendency, therefore, for some people to keep Jesus as a baby in a manger. As a baby, he can't very easily call their way of living into question.

Christmas is frequently called the "birthday of Jesus." Most birthday parties, however, do not require the one being honored to revert to being a baby. I suspect that at your birthday parties, you do not each year get back into the crib and celebrate. Most of us don't even get out our baby pictures.

But each year at Christmas, it's easier to lapse into total infatuation with the "baby" and forget that this infant grew into an adult who was hung on a cross.

Part of the problem is that the New Testament tells us nothing about the life of Jesus from the time shortly after his birth until he reached the age of twelve, and then there is only one brief incident recorded about him at that age.

Perhaps those who remembered Jesus did not consider this part of his life to be crucial for God's revelation to the world. Or maybe they wanted to keep our minds open to the fuller truth of Jesus as an adult. The Gospel of Mark, considered by many scholars to be the oldest of the gospels, mentions nothing at all about his birth or early life. The Apostle Paul never talked about Jesus as a baby or a young man.

A baby is easier for our consciences. A baby is so simple to worship. Ethics do not proceed from the mouth of a baby. A baby doesn't ask us to take up our cross daily and follow him. Babies are so innocent and helpless. They haven't yet learned to accept or reject our definitions of success or failure.

So, like John the Baptist in prison, we can make the mistake of thinking of Jesus only in terms of what we want him to be. Our temptation is to keep him as a baby. We have little trouble worshiping him as a baby, but it's more difficult to stand at the foot of the cross.

All of this is not to deny the importance of the Christmas story, the story that reminds us that God entered our world as a newborn baby, in the same way that all of us entered this world. But we need to also remember that he grew into an adult. It is his whole life, including his death and resurrection, that continues to call some of our priorities into question.

Jesus was not a sentimentalist. He was a complete realist. He said that everything opposed to love and harmony in God's creation is doomed. Many of the things we worship are false.

We say, "Blessed are those who have power." Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

He also said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" These are good words to remember at this time of year. "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you."

I knew a man who had a well-to-do aunt who was quite fond of him when he was a baby and a little boy. Since she lived a long distance from him, she had seen him only twice in the past fifteen years. But she continued to send him a birthday card and present each year, although the gifts continued to be suitable for a child of six to ten years old. She could never quite accept the fact that the child had become an adult.

Each year, this young man would pass the gift to some needy youngster who could use it. This case is not difficult to understand. In growing up, this young man had acquired some values that were quite different from those of his aunt. He had become part of a group ministry that lived and worked in the slums of a large city, and he carried on his ministry there. In doing so, he and others came to challenge some of the power holders and landlords. His aunt could never understand what happened to that sweet little baby boy she loved so much. Why did he have to grow up and change? He seemed so different as a child.

As we recall the baby in the manger each year during this season, we also need to remember that this baby became an adult, and the power holders of his time rightly saw him as a threat to their way of doing things, and so they crucified him.

In a book by Harry Emerson Fosdick, called Dear Mr. Brown, Fosdick writes about a father's frustrating attempt to explain the nature of God to his young daughter, who was confused by the stories of war and destruction in parts of the Old Testament. The father read to her from some of the later prophets, "What does God require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Then he read to his daughter from the New Testament: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God.” After a short pause, the little girl said to him, “Daddy, it seems to me that God grew better as God grew older.” That’s one way of putting it. Another way is to say that God grows better as we come into a more mature knowledge of God.

Christmas is a beautiful time, and it’s quite appropriate to remember and celebrate the fact that God entered this world in a new way in the person of Jesus, and that this Jesus was born in the same way that all of us enter this world.

But then our faith needs to grow and expand as this same Jesus becomes an adult and is always more than our expectations or ideas. This Jesus cannot be kept in the manger or in any kind of box, or in any creed or doctrine.

It’s certainly fitting to worship the baby in the manger, for God is there in all innocence and vulnerability, and God is also in Jesus as an adult. The manger, like the cross, is a revealing symbol of powerlessness. Someone once said, “We want God to be strong so that we can be weak. But God wants to be weak so that we can be strong.”

I have a little paperback book in my office with the title Sometimes God Has a Kid’s Face. The book is about a children’s shelter in a large city where the church, with many volunteers, offers shelter to young people who have run away from home and finally have nowhere else to go. The book is filled with true stories of these young people who frequently have been exploited by adults.

Sometimes God does have a child’s face, even a baby’s face, and God also has a worn-down, wrinkled adult face.

Do you want to meet Jesus this Christmas? You will find him in the person of homeless infants, children, and adults. You will find him in the jails and prisons among thousands of forgotten people. You will find him in the hospitals, and you will find him in your homes and families as well. You will find him as you reach out to others.

According to an ancient myth, at Creation’s start, Christ and Satan were each requested to submit to God a plan for dealing with the new human race that was already showing signs of delinquency. Satan’s plan was simple, the kind that many of us would suggest. Satan said, “God has armies of angels to command, why not assign an angel with punitive power to each human being? That should keep humanity in line.” Satan in this ancient story was the first hardliner, urging God to punish people into submission.

In contrast to this plan, Jesus’s suggestion was extraordinarily imaginative and implied a regard for humanity so high that Satan must’ve made fun of it. “Let them have free will and go their own way,” Jesus proposed, “only let me live and die as one of them, both as an example of how to live and to show them how much you love them. The only answer to their delinquency is for them to realize that there is more love and mercy in you than there is sin in them.”

At Christmas, it becomes clear which plan God chose to implement. Sometimes, like John the Baptist in his prison cell, we have a hard time understanding and accepting God’s loving plan. It is always more than we expect. Amen.