Sunday, December 16, 2001
DIFFERENT THAN EXPECTED
Matthew 11:2-11

If your experience is like mine, there have been many times in your life when you have expected one thing, and what you received turns out to be a lot different than you expected. At Christmas time, you've heard children say, "This gift is certainly different than I expected." It can be less than what the child asked for, or more. Or it can be something totally unexpected, a complete surprise. You asked for a puppy and expected a live one, but instead, you received a stuffed animal.

There have been gifts you've received that, at the time, were not only different than expected, but as time passed, you discovered they were much more valuable than you first imagined.

For example, as I look back on my childhood and growing up years, I realize now that some of the greatest gifts my parents gave me were their time, the security of a loving home, and the assurance that I was loved and accepted unconditionally, not only by them but also by God. But at the time, I had no idea how valuable these gifts were.

We sing the hymn "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus" at least once each year during Advent. However, the more I read the Bible stories about the birth of Jesus and his later ministry of teaching and healing, I am convinced that the title and theme of the hymn should be changed to something like, "Come, O Least Expected Jesus" or "Come, O Different Than Expected Jesus."

The gift of God coming to us in the form of a human being, which we recall and celebrate at this time of year, can be different than we expect. This has been true from the beginning. Consider the experience of John the Baptist. He was the "preparer of the way." His ministry was to alert people, as I said in last week's sermon, that the "kingdom of heaven," which is another way of saying "the presence of God," was here, present among them, especially in the person of Jesus. He even had the privilege and honor of baptizing Jesus.

After many months, or even a year or two, John the Baptist was arrested and put in prison because he had been very critical of some government officials. In jail, he had plenty of time to think, and he kept getting reports about the ministry of Jesus. Although large crowds followed Jesus, his actions didn't match what John expected the Messiah to be or do. He kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, forgiving sinners, eating with outcasts, going to parties, accepting women as equals, and preaching good news to the poor. He even heard that Jesus had eaten in the home of a tax collector and, at a wedding reception, had turned water into wine, and that he had forgiven a woman caught in adultery. Some of his critics even called Jesus a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John languished in prison, he couldn't help wondering, "Did I make a mistake? Is this man the one we expected?" So John sent some of his followers to investigate. They came to Jesus and told him about John's questions and doubts. According to the gospel of Matthew, they asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

It's important to notice how Jesus answered their question. He did not say, "Now that's a dumb question." He did not say, "If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you." He did not say, "Okay, I'll go over this one more time. You might want to write this down." He answered their question

by saying: “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 based on what I am doing.

John the Baptist had different ideas of what the Messiah would be and do. He had described the Savior primarily as a judge who would be stern and demanding. John was a fire-and-brimstone preacher. He had taken a vow of poverty and lived in the wilderness. He didn’t attend parties or eat in the homes of sinners. He assumed the Savior would follow this pattern.

As you may have discovered, there is often a wide difference between your idea of something and the thing itself. If you are married or have been married, you’ve probably noticed a difference between your idea of what marriage would be before you were married and what it turned out to be after some time. It continues to change.

The same thing happens when you take a new job. Your idea of the job before you work there and what it turns out to be afterward may be quite different.

Or maybe you’ve had the experience of preparing to meet someone, and when the person arrives and you get to know her, she turns out to be different than you expected. The person may turn out to be better than expected or worse.

If you are the parent of one or more children, I’m sure you’ve discovered that becoming a parent is somewhat different than the idea of parenthood. It is different than what you expected.

When John’s messengers reported back to him, the Bible does not tell us what his response was. But from later history, we can assume that John changed his assumptions and accepted Jesus as God’s revelation, even though he was different than he expected.

But how about you? Most people have some idea in mind, some picture in their head, as to the kind of person Jesus was and is. They have some concept of what God is and how and where God is at work in the world. But as you’ve heard me say many times before, you always need to be open to the possibility that God is different than you expect. Furthermore, you will never know all there is to know about God and the creation.

One of the most helpful books ever written on this subject is by J.B. Phillips, titled Your God is Too Small. In this classic, Phillips demonstrates how frequently our ideas of God are inadequate, limited, and parochial, so that if and when you experience God in a way different from your preconceived notions, you might miss God altogether because you were not prepared to meet God in ways you had not expected. The same is true of Jesus. You might have the tendency to keep him pictured in your mind as you 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 almost everyone. But it can also be a liability. You can become so entranced with the beautiful story of a baby in a manger that you miss the rest of the story. After all, a baby is harmless, helpless, dependent, and vulnerable. It’s easy to be charmed by the story of a baby and grow sentimental about it. It does not require you to do very much.

Some people prefer to keep Jesus as a baby. As an infant, he can't very easily call your way of living or thinking into question. Keeping Jesus as a baby reminds me of the advice a college president gave to the commencement speaker before his speech. He said, "Think of yourself as the body at an Irish wake. They need you in order to have the party, but nobody expects you to say very much."

Christmas is sometimes 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 get back into the crib each year.

But each year during Advent and 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 shortly after his birth until he reached the age of 12, and there is only one brief story recorded about him at that age. Then we hear nothing more about him until he is 30 years old and begins his public ministry.

Perhaps those who remembered Jesus did not consider the first 30 years of his life crucial for understanding him as God's revelation to the world. Or perhaps they wanted to keep our minds open to the fuller truth of Jesus as an adult. The gospel of Mark, considered to be the oldest of the gospels, mentions nothing at all about his birth or early life. The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, never talked about Jesus as a baby or young man.

A baby is easier on your conscience. A baby is easier to adore. Ethics do not proceed from the mouth of a baby. A baby doesn't ask you to take up your cross daily and follow him. Babies are so much simpler.

Like John the Baptist in prison, you can make the mistake of thinking of Jesus only in terms of what you want him to be. You can be tempted to keep him as a baby. You will have little trouble worshiping him as a baby, but it's more difficult to stand at the foot of the cross.

All of what I've been saying is not to deny the importance of the Advent and Christmas stories, the stories that remind us that God entered this world as a newborn baby in the same way we all entered this world. But you also need to move beyond the Christmas stories. It is his whole life, his teachings, and his death and resurrection that call into question some of our priorities.

Jesus was not a sentimentalist. He was a realist. He said that everything opposed to love and harmony in God's creation is ultimately doomed. Many of the things we worship are false. We say, "Blessed are those who have power and wealth." 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. He also said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Love your enemies; bless those who persecute you."

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 also read to her from the prophet Micah, who said, "What does the Lord 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 you come into a more mature knowledge of God.

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

But then your faith needs to grow and expand as this same Jesus becomes an adult and is always more and different than your expectations and ideas. He cannot be kept forever in the manger or in any kind of box or even in any rigid creed or doctrine.

Do you want to meet the Spirit of the living God as revealed in Jesus this Advent and Christmas? You will find God's loving Spirit in the person of homeless infants, children, and adults. You will find God's loving Spirit in thousands of forgotten people in the jails and prisons. You will find God's loving Spirit as revealed in Jesus in the hospitals, and you will find God's loving Spirit in your homes and families. You will find God's loving Spirit wherever and whenever you reach out to others in love.

If Jesus is God with us, then you will not only find him in church but also in unexpected places. What is the least religious place you can think of? That's also where you will find God's loving Spirit, and it will be different than you expected. Amen.