

The Blessings of Unmeetable Expectations
Matthew 3:1-12
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Some of you may have heard me tell the story of the couple who were coming to the end of their pre-marital counseling sessions with their pastor. They had talked about anger management, finances, in-laws, children, the whole gamut of issues and so the pastor asked them if there was any last question to ask or concern to raise in the relative safety of the pastor's office. They thought about it for a moment and then the groom-to-be said, "Well, I guess there is one thing I'd like to know. Honey, why do you cut the ends off the ham before you cook it?" And the bride-to-be thought about it and answered that she had simply always done it that way and that she had learned it from her mother. And so the groom was satisfied and they left the office all ready to get married. The matter did not end there, however, for the question so troubled the bride that she called her mother and asked her, "Mom, why do you cut the ends of the ham before you cook it?" to which the mother replied that she had simply always done it that way and that she had learned it from her mother. A little while later, the phone rang at the home of the bride's grandmother who was confronted with the same question by her daughter, the mother of the bride. "Mom, why do you cut the ends of the ham before you cook it?" And the grandmother replied, "So it will fit in the pan I use to

cook it.” Often, we do things for reasons we cannot even recall. That’s just the way they are.

I think the same is especially true at Christmastime. Family traditions die hard, and woe betide the new bride who suggests that the gifts should be opened at midnight rather than first thing in the morning. Heaven and earth will exchange places sooner than some families will forsake going to grandmother’s house for Christmas dinner. How many families have the same cookies, the same decorations, the same traditions year after year after year even though everyone agrees they are getting pretty stale? And in those families, how many in the family find themselves in the same role year after year, with the same responsibilities year after year, and with the same expectations placed upon them either by self or others. For a wide variety of reasons which philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists can explain better than I, Christmas has become a rather pressure-packed experience, what with finding the perfect gift, writing out personalized greeting cards, doing all the holiday baking, and taking the trip around the neighborhood to look at light displays, not to mention keeping all the children’s gifts surprises until the blessed morning. On top of that, there are all the emotional expectations of keeping everyone happy, making it a spiritual experience, or maybe an experience without spirits - if you know what I mean. All these traditions and activities and expectations, and I’ve only named a few, can be overwhelming. It’s no wonder that the period between US Thanksgiving and Christmas has such a

high rate of depression and suicide, and that so much family drama plays itself out so destructively during the Christmas season. It's just too much. Maybe there ought to be a reality show...

But here's the thing. Who said it had to be this way? Who decreed that all expectations must be met or Christmas isn't worth celebrating? Who came up with the idea that if you work hard enough, you can make everybody experience the joy you think they should want? And who came up with the idea that you have to play the role because someone else wants to play theirs? If there is a time of our year, or a time of our lives, when we run smack dab into our inability to live up to expectations, either those of our own, or those placed on us by others, it is at Christmas. And the trap we fall into is believing that it is our fault, that we just don't measure up, that we have somehow failed to invest Christmas with the meaning it so richly deserves. If you have never experienced any of what I am talking about, praise God, count your blessings, and share the secrets of your success, but be prepared to receive a very long line of wisdom-seekers, none of whose expectations you will be able to meet. And then, consider yourself welcome to the club.

John the Baptist knew something about unmeetable expectations. In an age of enormous expectations about the coming of the promised Messiah, John had created a stir with his calls for repentance and confession and good works, so great a stir that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan

were going out to him, so great a stir that even Pharisees and Sadducees were coming for baptism. Believe me, when the Pharisees and Sadducees come calling, you've touched a nerve. Very likely, the pulse of the populace was beating out, "He's the one, he's the one, he's the one" and with each passing day, the expectations grew greater that he was the promised one. The temptation to believe the hype must have been mounting. But John seems to have had his priorities straight, he seems to have understood that it was not his job to meet the expectations of all these desperate people, all these chosen people thinking they had been forgotten, all these sorrowful people looking for a little joy. He understands that his role is the harbinger, not the harvester, a voice in the wilderness and not the Word of God. John flat out tells us about his limitations, what he can and cannot do for us, and what Jesus will soon be coming to do -- Look, "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals." He says very clearly what we all might like to say from time to time, maybe especially at Christmas: "I can't meet your expectations and I'm not even going to try. I'm just going to wear my funky clothing and eat my locusts and wild honey, and let the chips fall where they may."

But he also says a lot more about expectations, especially about the blessings of unmeetable expectations. You see, when he reminds those Pharisees and Sadducees that it will be Jesus, and not he, who separates the wheat from the chaff - the good part of the grain from the bad - he reminds us that God is not asking *us*

to clear the threshing floor, nor gather the wheat into the granary, not burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. God is not asking *us* to put the ax to the root of the unprofitable tree. God is not asking *us* to raise up stones into children of Abraham. We don't have to do any of those things to be loved by God. And freed from *those* responsibilities, we are able to take on those we *have* been given, and indeed rejoice that God has placed expectations, however strenuous, upon us. And just what does God expect of us, at least according to John the Baptist? Well, it is nothing less than, but nothing more than, this: to confess, to repent, and to bear good fruit. Good fruit, mind you, not those candied orange peels, or stale fruitcakes. But seriously, confession, repentance, and bearing good fruit. Not exactly anyone's first thoughts about getting ready for the holidays, but weighty expectations which are truly easier to meet than those we place on ourselves or those placed on us by others, easier because they are given to us by a God who knows that the only expectations we can ever really meet are those which God puts on our hearts.

The good news of John the Baptist is not only that Christ is coming, but also that there is a way to deal with the expectations placed upon you this Christmas season. John is guiding us toward taking responsibility not for the expectations others have placed upon us, but for what God is asking of us, and I believe that when we focus on ourselves, on our confession, on our repentance, on our good fruit, the burden of the expectations of others will dissolve away, and we'll feel as

free to speak the truth as John the Baptist was. Not that we'll be bold enough to call Uncle Robert and Aunt June and their nasty kids a brood of vipers, but perhaps bold enough to say, "If you want those special Christmas cookies this year, you'll just have to make them yourselves." And we'll be able to go to bed and sleep well on Christmas Eve knowing that even though we couldn't find that one last gift that makes the value of our children's gifts exactly equal, that they will just have to get over it. And maybe, just maybe, we'll be bold enough to eat Christmas dinner when the food is actually hot and ready, even though the chronically late arrivals haven't shown up on time again this year. We'll be able to do these things because we will remember that the only expectations we really need to meet are God's, and that God is not judging us on the rest.

As we make our way through Advent, may it be a time to reflect on how each of us is preparing for the coming of our Lord. Are we as mindful of the awesome, yet attainable expectations of God as we are of those other overwhelming and unmeetable ones we'd just as soon be through with? Friends, give yourself and everyone around you the perfect gift this year and confess, repent, and bear good fruit, rejoicing that this is really all you have to do. Amen.