

+ Matthew 11:2-11 + Series: Who Is Coming? + Theme: The Messiah Is Fulfilling!¹ +
+ 3rd Sunday in Advent + 11 December 2016 +

“It doesn’t look like the picture.” You go to your favorite fast food restaurant planning to pick up a quick meal. You see the mouth-watering picture of a delicious cheeseburger with a toasted bun, a plump, sizzling hamburger patty, crisp lettuce and tomatoes, and gooey, melted cheese topped off with a perfect dollop of ketchup. So you order that deluxe cheeseburger in the picture, but when your order comes out, that mouth-watering burger has been smooshed down to half the size of the picture because it’s been tightly wrapped up in paper. You open up the burger and the cheese is kinda melted. The hamburger patty could fit in a DVD case. The lettuce is wilted, and the burger is bathed in ketchup. It doesn’t look like the picture.

“It doesn’t look like it did in the ad.” “It doesn’t do what it promised in the commercial!” “I read all the reviews and researched this item, yet it failed to do what I was hoping it could do.” Many of us have had that experience with products we purchased or received as gifts. A toy has parts that snap all too easily or has technology that really isn’t that good. An item that was part of a huge sale proves why it was marked down so much. It’s cheaply made or fails to live up to its own advertising. The item or product fails all the expectations you had when you purchased or received that gift.

Products fail to meet expectations all the time, but what about life? Have your plans, your hopes, your dreams always turned out the way you expected? Life often doesn’t “look like the picture.” For example, people, being sinners, often fail to meet expectations. A couple gets married anticipating years of wedded bliss, but a vile combination of natural selfishness and seductive temptation pulls the two apart until the marriage is irreparably broken by a foolish act. Parents make promises to their kids to get them such-and-such or to take them here-or-there, but then something comes up, someone gets sick, or it doesn’t work out, and another promise is broken.

Situations in life may not turn out the way you expect. A young woman trains for years to get the job of her dreams only to find out that the job is a constant rat-race with endless mountains of work which leaves her exhausted and joyless. A young pastor graduates from the Seminary eager to set the world on fire, but soon discovers how challenging parish ministry really is as he meets people who could care less about Jesus, as he works with a congregation of sinful human beings, and as he learns why he is not the Savior by any stretch of the imagination. People dream of traveling to exotic locations, of experiencing culture and life elsewhere, only to see those idealistic dreams dashed with a lack of finances or opportunity. What you expect doesn’t always turn out the way you expect when life doesn’t “look like the picture.”

You wonder if thoughts like that went through the mind of John the Baptizer as he sat in the dungeons of Herod’s stronghold Machaerus. “Why doesn’t life look like the picture?” John had been an outspoken prophet of the Lord. You would expect nothing less from one whose ministry prophets had foretold centuries before, one whose primary task was to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Messiah—God’s chosen Savior.

John had called the different groups in society—tax collectors and “sinners,” soldiers and religious leaders—to **“repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!”** (Matthew 3:2) To kick off his public ministry, Jesus himself had come to John to be baptized. John continued to point to Jesus as **“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29) So John’s followers began to peel off and follow Jesus, but John was fine with that. **“He must become greater, I must become less.”** (John 3:30)

At about the same time, John called out Herod Antipas, who ruled the area where John served. Herod had convinced his brother’s wife to leave his brother and marry him instead. John told Herod, **“It is not lawful for you to have her.”** (Matthew 14:4) So Herod had him bound and thrown into the dungeons of Machaerus in the hope that he could eventually have John put to death.

The tables were turned for John, who had proclaimed the Messiah’s coming judgment. **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”** The Messiah was going to bring judgment on the earth, **“gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”** (Matthew 3:10,12)

So why was John languishing in prison, waiting for a death sentence that could come at any time? Where was the expected judgment? Where was the anticipated fire on the earth and condemnation of the wicked? Rather than the edge of God’s ax at the root of Herod’s tree, Herod’s sword was edging towards John’s neck. Rather than the unrepentant chaff being gathered for the oven, the wheat was feeling the heat of the flames. Life didn’t

¹ Some of the thoughts for this sermon were received with thanks from [a devotion](#) written by Prof. Richard Gurgel.

look like the picture that John had painted for the people. “Was I wrong about Jesus?” As John’s followers came to visit their teacher in prison, similar thoughts likely crossed their minds. “Were we wrong in following John? Was he mistaken in pointing to Jesus as the glory of Israel and light for the Gentiles?”

So John sent out a lifeline. He sent some of his followers out with a question to Jesus. **“Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?”** Now I suppose you could condemn John for what seems like a tremendous lack of faith, but put yourself in his sandals for a moment. His birth was announced by an angel. His mission was clear. His message informed everyone that the Messiah’s arrival was soon—and he had pointed everyone to Jesus as that promised Messiah. But what he expected didn’t look anything like what he had expected. John’s own death could come at any time—and even the strongest believer can have an attack of doubt near the end of their life. He needed assurance as much as his followers.

So how did Jesus respond to John’s question? Did Jesus condemn or ridicule the man? Jesus was not about to break this bruised reed. No condemnation crossed his lips, only perfect comfort. He pointed John and his followers back to the Scriptures. **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”** “John, see how I am doing everything Scripture said I would do! Look closer at Scripture’s picture of the Messiah—not just the coming judgment part—and what do you see? You see me. See me turn back the effects and consequences of sin—restoring sight and hearing and good health, the ability to walk and even life itself. Above all, the good news of forgiveness and eternal life and deliverance through me is being proclaimed to all whom sin has left poor and abandoned.” Jesus was meeting Scripture’s every expectation.

John could see that even from the bowels of Herod’s prison, and for that reason Jesus called the Baptizer blessed. **“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”** Yes, God’s wisdom and timing were not yet sending his fire of judgment to cleanse his threshing floor. Yet Jesus comforted John with the knowledge that the Messiah had come to fulfill all of God’s promises. “John, put your hope in me. Don’t stumble. Don’t let those creeping doubts push you off your bedrock foundation. Cling to what you know and can expect from me in Scripture. Not even Herod and his sword can take that from you.”

When John’s disciples took that message of comfort back to John, Jesus asked the crowd about their expectations. **“What did you go out into the desert to see?”** A reed? A man in soft, fine clothing? A prophet? Certainly they came out to see a prophet, but John was so much more than they had expected. **“This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptizer; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”**

John was so much more, yet Jesus said that the **“least in the kingdom of heaven”** is greater than John. Why? The least in the kingdom is greater than John because that person sees what John did not. That believer sees God’s chosen One who came to live and die and rise again, who would not just be the coming Judge, but the living Savior. That believer would experience the new life that the Savior brings—a life of true peace with God.

In the life of every believer, there always seems to come a time when you feel like John. Perhaps it happens when someone you trust, someone you love fails you. Perhaps it happens when something like your job or your health unexpectedly doesn’t prove to be the rock of certainty that you once thought it was. Perhaps it happens when you find yourself under the blazing heat of a particular temptation or when you watch the news or check your news feed to see what’s going on in the world.

What you expected doesn’t seem to turn out the way you expected. “God, why doesn’t life look like the picture? Why does it look you, the Ruler of all things, are just letting things run amuck? You promised to bless believers like me, but why does it seem like everything is going so badly in my life? Why can’t I catch a break? Where’s the victory? Where’s the joy, the happiness, the abundant blessing, the exceeded expectations?”

How does Jesus respond? Does he condemn you for your lack of faith? Does he ridicule you because you don’t understand life like he does? Does he break your broken reed? No. He sends a lifeline back to you through his Word.

“Remember how I fulfilled what Scripture said I would do? Look closer at all those prophecies in Scripture and see me. See what I have done for you. Peer into my manger bed and see peace between you and God. Follow my travels along the dusty roads of Israel and see how I turn back the effects and consequences of sin. Look up at me on the cross dying and see my sacrifice for your sins. Peer into my empty tomb and see how I even

conquer death. See my forgiving and patient compassion for you when you feel weak or when you doubt! Despite all the rumors to the contrary, see how I still reign over all things! See why you can depend on me, no matter how many failed expectations you experience in your life.”

Dear friends, products fail. People fail. Promises get broken. Life so often does not “look like the picture,” but Jesus never fails. Jesus never breaks a promise. Jesus defies all our expectations and reveals the loveliest picture of all—the portrait of our long-expected Savior. Blessed are you who see Jesus with open eyes of faith and leave your expectations with him. Amen.