

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany - February 12, 2023

Psalm 146

Matthew 11:7–19

“What did you come out to see?”

1. My friends and I were running late.
  - a. We were in college, and we had landed tickets to hear Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in concert at the massive Cotton Bowl with 90,000 of our closest friends.
    - i. It was a warm summer evening, and it was still pretty light out.
    - ii. As we walked from our car, we figured we’d be Ok getting to our seats a little late, we would only miss a couple of songs from the warm up band.
    - iii. But then as we made our way towards the gates, we could hear the crowd roar and then the initial chords for “Born in the USA” .
    - iv. Run! We yelled, and we sprinted towards the stadium.
    - v. We finally got settled and we enjoyed a pretty long concert (in my mind it was at least two-three hours)
  - b. I wasn’t a frequent concert goer as many of my friends were.
    - i. But still, I had an idea of what to expect.
    - ii. I figured there would be an opening act (I was wrong for this concert).
    - iii. And going to hear a singer I really liked (like Bruce, or Sting), the crowd and I were of course hoping they’d play all their greatest hits so we could sing along with them.
  - c. I expected to be on my feet, dancing, singing, swaying with the crowd.
    - i. The only tickets I could afford were always in the nosebleed sections, so it wasn’t like I was going to get to see the artist up close (the big TV screens helped),
    - ii. but I was just out there to enjoy the music, and making memories with friends.
2. Our Gospel passage for today is all about expectations, anticipation.
  - a. Though not a rock concert, yet certainly an intriguing attraction, John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer, in today’s translation) had been in ministry out in the desert for some time (we don’t know how long) and people from all over had been going out to hear him.
    - i. Jesus asks the crowd: When you went out to the desert to hear John the Baptist, what were you expecting to see? What experience did you look forward to?
  - b. In the passage immediately before what we read today, John, who had already been thrown in prison, sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus: are you the one we’ve been waiting for?

- i. And Jesus says to them: go and tell John what you see and hear, the people are healed and the poor are hearing the good news.
- c. It is when John's disciples leave to deliver Jesus' message that Jesus then turns to the crowd and asks:
  - i. What was your expectation when you went out there in the desert?
  - ii. John wasn't a soft charismatic preacher dressed in a fancy suit
  - iii. No, John was all business, focused, and he cut to the chase
  - iv. He was a tough prophet with harsh words to challenge the behavior of those who came to him
  - v. And yet also a leader with a big heart to welcome people from all walks of life as they sought to get closer to God.
  - vi. John spoke of repentance, of turning one's life around.
  - vii. John lived simply and fasted.
  - viii. If you could picture the biblical Elijah, here was his present day embodiment.
- d. A question that is not asked, however, is this: what did people expect when they came to see Jesus?
  - i. Some people were still making up their minds
  - ii. Some people who came to see Jesus expected miracles of healing and new teachings
  - iii. John the Baptist himself wasn't sure what to expect (are you the one?)
- e. It is fair to say that there were those who went out to see John or Jesus and got the experience they expected
  - i. But both John and Jesus were pushing the religious establishment beyond its comfort zone, or pushing them off their position of unquestioned power
  - ii. There was mounting opposition, as exemplified by the fact that John the Baptist had already been jailed (and would soon be executed)
  - iii. The time would come for the opposition to Jesus to come to a boiling point.
- f. Jesus points to the different approaches he and John had, and highlights the expectation the leaders of the time had that people would toe the line
  - i. John was severe, ascetic.
    - 1. He fasted, turned down earthly comfort, and preached repentance, telling people the Chosen One from God was coming, and people needed to be prepared.
    - 2. But he called out those in power.
    - 3. What did the powerful say about him? Oh, that one, he's got a demon!
  - ii. Jesus was warm and approachable
    - 1. He had compassion for the people; he healed many

2. He ate with anybody, regardless of societal norms
  3. His teaching upset the status quo, and offered a contrast to the interpretation of the scriptures by the people, presenting God as close at hand and eager to be in relationship with all, even those at the margins
  4. But he questioned the injustices in the society.
  5. What did the powerful say about him? Oh, that one, he's a drunk!
- g. Jesus offers a quaint image to critique the people who were coming after John and after him
- i. You're like kids in the playground, trying to decide for everybody else what game to play
  - ii. You're like girls and boys playing a flute, like if you're at a wedding dance, and you demand that everybody play along. Dance! Dance!
  - iii. You're like girls and boys playing at being in a funeral procession (I know, that's a strange game, isn't it?) You sing the funeral song and you demand that people play along. Cry! Cry!
  - iv. And you're upset because, John and Jesus, didn't play along.
  - v. John was somber and serious, and it's as if they played the flute to make him change his tune
  - vi. Jesus was unconventional and spoke of Good News, and it's as if they sang the funeral song wanting him to be more serious and play by their rules.
  - vii. They had gotten it exactly backwards!
3. All of which makes me wonder about our expectations
- a. I wonder what our expectations are when we approach the Bible looking to get closer to Jesus and to God.
  - b. I wonder what our expectations are when we gather to worship, to pray, to seek answers from God
  - c. "Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable." Have you heard this phrase before? I had actually heard it as applying to sermons, but apparently the original was written by humorist Finley Peter Dunne about the purpose of journalism: <https://www.pulitzer.org/article/voice-underdog-and-underprivileged#:~:text=tip%20about%20gratuities.-,%20bartender%20and%20eternal%20critic%20Mr.>
  - d. I wonder if that's what you expect from coming to church, that it will comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.
  - e. I imagine we come for many reasons, with different expectations, and that the reasons and expectations may even change from Sunday to Sunday.
    - i. We expect the music and its message to envelop us and lift us to a new level

- ii. We expect scriptures and sermons to help us make sense of senseless injustice around us and call us to action
  - iii. We expect joyful fellowship to lift our spirits
  - iv. We expect quiet contemplation and prayer to heal our soul
  - v. We expect to sit next to fellow travelers in the journey of faith who have gone through what we're going through right now
  - vi. We expect to sit next to people with as many questions and doubts as we have
- f. We're not here to tell Jesus who or what to be,
- i. to try to strip all the challenging parts of his message and expect that the only thing Jesus cared about was getting us to heaven
- g. I try to imagine what it would have been like if Jesus had come, not back then but now, and what the opposition would have sounded like to
- i. his message of loving our neighbor as ourselves,
  - ii. to do good to those who hate us,
  - iii. to bless the meek and the peacemakers,
  - iv. and to see him have dinner with
    - 1. single parents on welfare and CEOs of polluting companies,
    - 2. undocumented immigrants, and KKK members
    - 3. police officers and people fresh out of prison.
4. What did we expect coming here? What did we come out to church to hear? A soft message? A prophetic word? A challenging passage? An unsettling lesson?

Sources <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14/commentary-on-matthew-1116-19-25-30-3>

#### Reflection questions

1. Share a story of going to church when the experience went beyond your expectations.
2. What do you think people were expecting when they went out to hear John the Baptizer and Jesus? Different things?
3. Is there a disconnect between what people expect to experience today by going to church and what churches are actually offering? Why?