

Title: Not what I thought
Text: Matthew 11.1-6
Theme: Following Jesus is not always what we think it will be
Series: Matthew #61
Prop Stmtnt: Following Jesus demands faith in spite of unfulfilled expectations.

Websites have a lot in common with dating. Neither websites nor dating have a whole lot in common with reality. Websites try to do more than communicate information; they try to convey an image of the product, business or organization. The image may not have anything to do with reality. So, when you take dating and websites and you put them together, you can assume that there is very little, if anything that comes close to reality. When someone says, "I met someone on-line" we normally react how? Oh no! Right? We just assume that reality is not anywhere close to the image, or the expectations. We assume that so much, that we tend to be jaded, don't we? We have come to expect that people are not what we thought they were.

That is true to some measure about Jesus. He is not the person we usually think he is. But, it is not because he has pretended to be something else. In fact, so much of the ministry of Christ is spent trying to inform people of what the Messiah is really like. The people knew what kind of Messiah they wanted. Jesus was not the Messiah they wanted, but he was the Messiah they needed. Not much has changed. Most of the time, we create an image of Jesus in our minds that is formed by selecting certain stories from the Bible and merging those with our wants. The Jesus that we create is not necessarily the Jesus who is. It is more than disappointing to be let down. It is devastating to discover that we are following a false Jesus.

If Matthew's gospel was a musical score, chapters 11-12 would bring about a change in mood. We would hear the cellos, the string bass, and low brass introduce a more ominous feel. It would be subtle, at first, but we would feel it. Although we have seen some evidences of rejection, most of the people so far have been positive toward Jesus. That all begins to change right here. In fact these chapters set us up for a major turn that takes place in chapter 13. Excitement, celebration, enthusiasm and hope start to give way to doubt and even rejection. These two chapters begin with doubt, even from John, the prophet, John, the Baptizer, John, the cousin of Jesus.

There are some people who are misinformed and they need to be instructed and re-aligned. They, like John the Baptist experience seasons of doubt, but in the end, their default is to believe. They do not believe perfectly. No one but Jesus believes perfectly. But, in spite of their imperfect belief, they do not quit believing. In spite of the fact that this was not what I thought it was going to be, they still don't quit believing. There are others who are flat out rebellious and need to be exposed and confronted. This morning, we are looking at verses 1-6, where we learn about the conflict and confusion that John the Baptist experienced over Christ. What he thought Jesus was going to do did not match the circumstances of his life. Though John was understandably confused, his default position was to trust. Let's look a little closer. When following Christ:

I. Expect life to be unfair. (2)

The political situation in Israel during the life of Christ is really messy. For one, the nation of Israel is under the control of the Roman Empire. Secondly, the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees keep popping up and acting like they are in charge. Thirdly, there seems to be all these guys named Herod and it is difficult to keep them straight. So, let me try to explain. From 37 B.C. to A.D.4 Palestine was ruled by a king named Herod. He considered himself to be great so he called himself, Herod, the Great. He was the one who ordered the death of the infants in Bethlehem when he was informed of the birth of the Messiah. This Herod died in A.D.4. His kingdom was divided up amongst his 4 sons. One of his sons was named Herod Antipas. Herod had another son named Philip. To make matters a bit more confusing, Philip married a girl named, Herodias. This account involves Philip and Herod. Philip ruled over the area north and east of the Sea of Galilee (map) while Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and over Perea. As an aside, Herod Antipas was married to a princess, whose father was a king from Nabatea (the region just east of Perea). It was rather common for one king to give another king, his daughter to be married in order to secure peace between the two kingdoms. It was assumed that the one king would not attack the kingdom where his daughter lived and if her husband was planning on attacking her family of origin, that she would warn her dad. Since marriage like this was considered to be an act of peace, what do you think would happen if they divorced? Exactly! This would be considered an act of war.

So, here is the problem. Herod Antipas decides that he is in love with his brother's wife (half-brother actually), Herodias. So, she (Herodias) divorces her husband Philip and Herod Antipas divorces his wife. This does not help matters at the family reunion. But, when Herod Antipas divorces his wife, he enrages the Nabateans who attack Herod Antipas and would have most likely killed him, if Rome had not intervened and saved his neck. Herod has a problem. The Sanhedrin is ticked off because he has violated Jewish law. His half-brother and his little kingdom are ticked off because he stole their queen. His ex-father-in-law and his kingdom are angry and almost killed him and the people in his own territory are not exactly thrilled with what he has done. His divorce and remarriage is obviously a touchy issue, right? Herod is at a fortress city in Perea and brings in John in order to preach. John uses the occasion to tell Herod that what he has done is wrong.

Imagine that somehow you get invited to dinner with the President, would you just blurt out, "Hey what is up with this Bergdahl mess? What on earth were you thinking? Are you out of your mind?" Or, perhaps a scenario that is a little more like this one, would be if you were invited to speak at the national day of prayer. Would you speak about abortion or same-sex marriage? Would you use your one-time opportunity to address an issue of complete moral failure on the part of your leader? John did. You can only imagine that when he brought it up, that it felt as if all of the oxygen just left the room and that everyone there was going, "NOOOOO, you didn't just say that did you?"

What's more is that Matthew 14.4 makes it clear that John is like a dog with a bone on this issue. He won't let it go. He keeps talking about it. So, Herod puts him in prison. We will look at this in more detail when we get to chapter 14, but for now, John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus is in prison because he spoke the truth. But, think about it, would he not be emboldened to speak the truth because, after all, Jesus, the Messiah was here and he was going to take over anyway, right? Wouldn't you assume that? Even if Herod had John put into prison, it wouldn't last for long. Jesus was here. So, what is going on?

A. John is in prison and Jesus is free.

Not only that, but there is no indication that John is going to get busted out of prison. The Jewish historian, Josephus tells us that John was in prison for about a year before his death. That is a long time. I do not know the protocol about this particular prison, but it was very common in those days for the friends and family of the imprisoned to provide food and clothing for the inmate because, if you did not bring them food, they would not eat. If that is the case with John, then his imprisonment is not only long and difficult on him; it is long and difficult on his disciples. Some, of them had left John and followed Jesus. There is an obvious sense of discouragement, maybe even disillusionment. John is sitting in prison for as long as the king wants him to. And Herod does not know what to do with him. If he lets him out, John only creates more problems because of his preaching, but if he kills him, then Herod has even more domestic problems on his hands because his people think that John is a prophet. So, John sits and sits and sits.

John is no longer able to preach, but Jesus is and not only that but I think that we can safely assume that John has received word of some pretty spectacular stories of Jesus' ministry (v.2). So, what is John supposed to think? Jesus is out and about preaching, healing, performing miracles, while his cousin, his ministry partner, the guy who baptized him is rotting in prison. Jesus apparently makes no plans to go to Perea at this point in order to visit John or do anything to set him free. Does Jesus know about what has happened to John? Yes. But Jesus apparently does not do anything about it. So, what is John supposed to conclude?

B. Jesus is a king, but Herod is on the throne.

John had prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus. John had preached, "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He publicly declared that the kingdom of heaven was, like a dawn about to break upon the land because the King was here! The King from heaven was here! John told his audience about Jesus back in chapter 3. He said, "*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" If anyone is chaff, it is Herod Antipas right? This guy is a pitiful excuse for a man, much less a king. John had nothing to fear, right? Or, maybe he did.

What kind of a king allows people to do bad things and get away with it? Wasn't John right to speak out about his marriage? Herod was wrong, wasn't he? Wasn't this a dishonorable thing to do? Wasn't he sending the wrong message to his own people and to others? So, why does God allow evil people to be in positions of power who will use that position of power to crush good people? Where is God, when you need him? And if Jesus is king, then why is a guy like Herod on the throne?

C. Jesus is helping people, but not John.

Again, notice the wording of v.2. "*When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ...*" Obviously, John is hearing about the things that Jesus is doing and I am assuming that John is trying to reconcile the deeds of Christ to his own circumstances and it does not make sense. Why is Jesus helping so many people, but he is not helping me? So, John sends word to Jesus.

II. Assume that you do not know the entire story. (3)

You and I can only see life from our perspective. We are in the moment. We are trapped in our own time. There is so much more going on than we know, though we know that there is so much more going on. I think that John knew that, at least to some degree.

John's response was one of doubt and faith at the same time. Notice, that John sent word to Jesus. He asked. He did not accuse. He asked. At the same time, he made it clear that he was thinking that it was possible that Jesus was not who he had claimed to be. John clearly was doubting, but it was not a "I am quitting" doubting, it was a "I don't get it" doubting. There is a difference. The "I am quitting" doubting is a doubting that says, since you did not do what I demanded, I have the right to quit. The "I don't get it" doubting recognizes that I do not have the benefit of seeing everything. "I don't understand what is going on here. This does not make sense to me. Maybe I missed something along the line. What am I supposed to think?" You can doubt with humility or you can doubt with arrogance. Humility says, "I don't get it, but I am not quitting." Arrogance says, "It's not what I signed up, I'm done." In other words, you did not do what I demand.

This is why I think that it is so important that we fully disclose what it really means to be a follower of Christ to anyone who is considering coming to faith in Christ. Life is unfair for every follower of Christ, for now. We follow a leader who was wrongly accused, and unjustly executed. We should expect life to be unfair, for the moment. But there is more to the story than this moment. John may have thought that Jesus was getting the better end of the deal, but that was not the case. Yes, John was killed in prison in a grievous manner. But his death by beheading was not like death by crucifixion. The ultimate injustice happened to Christ. All other injustices to us, though real and hurtful are not like the injustice that happened to him. The injustice to John was part of the injustice to Jesus. The injustice to Jesus was part of our salvation. God takes the worst injustices and turns them upside down for the accomplishment and the advancement of the gospel. The question before me is this: Am I willing to treasure the advancement of the gospel

accomplished through the injustice more than I treasure my comfort, my life or my quest for respect? Am I willing to trust God to accomplish his plan even if that plan calls me to suffer injustice so that Christ is put on display? You see, John really was a forerunner of Jesus. He not prepared people for Christ in the way he preached, but he prepared people for Christ, in the way he died. But, here is a rather amazing response on the part of Christ. The disciples of John come to Jesus and ask him the question. How does Jesus respond? How does Jesus prove his authenticity? He takes John back to the Word.

III. Trust the Word. (4-5)

Can I trust myself in the midst of despondency? No! Can I trust my ability to think clearly and rationally when my life has been completely upended and I find myself in a setting or routine that I would never have imagined just a few weeks ago? What am I supposed to think?

John and Jesus. This was the tag-team, the dynamic-duo, the 1-2 prophet punch, the set-up guy and the closer. John would prepare the way and Jesus would set everything in order. John thought he knew how it was all going to work out and Jesus did not tell him any differently. So, John sends word to Jesus and asks him if there was actually someone else who was going to come. Maybe Jesus was sort of like another John. It is as if John is spinning different theories and ideas and trying to reconcile them with the Scriptures. But, I love how Jesus responds. He takes John back to the Scriptures. Jesus goes back to the book of Isaiah where Isaiah (chapters 26, 29, 35, 42 and 61) spoke of the Messiah who would come and would give sight to the blind, heal the lame, cleanse the lepers, restore hearing to the deaf, raise the dead and preach good news to the poor.

So, what is the answer? Yes, Jesus is the Messiah who was promised. But, John is still in prison. So, what do you do when the Word tells you one thing, but your circumstances seem to tell you something different? Now, before you answer that, let's stop and think about this for a second. What are the Scriptures? The Word is God's record and interpretation of life. My circumstances are, in reality, my interpretation of life, from what I know. Here is what I desperately need to do. I need to inform my view of my circumstances (which admittedly is myopic and flawed) with God's view of life, which is final and perfect. In other words, I need to take what is known and use that to inform that which is unknown or known imperfectly. I need to take what is objective and divine and use it to interpret what is subjective, fluid and human. I need to take what is clearly known about God and use that interpret what is not unclearly known about life.

Let me give you an example. Do you remember the account in Daniel 3 of the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow down to the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up in Babylon? The boys were arrested and were threatened with death in a fiery furnace. Their reply to the threat was that our God is able to deliver us, and they were confident that he would but even if he didn't they we're not going to bow down. In other words, we want God to deliver us. We believe that he will deliver us, but if he doesn't deliver us, we are not quitting on God. We believe God, no matter what. Their view of God that was driven by the Word trumped their circumstances, no matter what. What am

I supposed to do when I am tempted to doubt? Go back to the Word. I cannot always trust my feelings. I cannot always trust my interpretation of things. I cannot always trust the perspective of others, but I can trust the Word. Jesus takes John back to the Word.

And it is not only good for John; it is good for Jesus too. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed for the cup of wrath to be taken from him if it was possible. He took his fears, and his questions (doubts?) to God. Does it really have to be this way? Is there another way? His circumstances were telling him one thing, but what he knew about his Father meant that there was more to the story than what he was feeling at the moment. Even when he was on the cross, and he felt abandoned, he prayed the Word. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” was a direct quote from Psalm 22.1 Jesus took John to the word in order to address his fears and doubts, just as he himself would go to the Word when he had to confront his own fears.

And what happened? God delivered the 3 Hebrew boys, not from the fiery furnace, but through the fiery furnace. What happened to Christ? God did not deliver him from the cross, nor did he deliver him from dying, but he did deliver him from the grave and from death. Why? God was able to save his children in Babylon in part by saving those boys. But God could not save you from judgment if he saved his boy from death. Jesus was not saved from death. But, we were saved from wrath.

IV. Do not be offended by Christ. (6)

This statement is both a promise and a warning. The warning is this: Following Christ comes at a cost. Following Christ will most likely not meet your expectations. John the Baptist was neither writing nor reading a book on “Your Best Life Now” in prison. He was experiencing the unjust punishment of standing up for The King to a king. And Jesus does not apologize to him for it. Jesus does not rescue him from the consequences. Jesus does not fix it, now. Notice the word, offended. This word in the original language of the New Testament is scandalizo from which we get our English scandal. It literally means to trip up and fall down. What will you do when Jesus does not meet your expectations in this life? Will you trip over Jesus and fall down and quit? Jesus says, you are blessed if you don't.

He knows the cost of perseverance. He knows the demand. And while he is grieved over what John is experiencing (14.13), he does not apologize for it. Just as following Christ will most likely not meet your expectations in this life, it will absolutely blow you away for the life to come.

Conclusion:

- 1) What is in your life right now that is not what you imagined, or what you assumed? Is this something that you brought on at all, or is it completely, as far as you can tell, unfair and not in anyway the result of decisions that you have made?

- 2) How are you going to choose to think about it? Are you willing to let this situation own you, cause you to doubt Christ, trip you up and fall down? Or will you choose to embrace what is clear in the Word to inform what is unclear in your life?
- 3) What has God revealed about himself in his Word? What are some of the attributes of God that you need to consider? Is God good? Is God sovereign? Is God rich in mercy? Is God faithful? Is God omniscient? Is God omnipresent? How do these truths speak to your circumstance right now?

Beloved, know this. While Jesus gently corrects John, he does not criticize him. In fact, as we will see next week, Jesus pays him an incredible compliment. Jesus knows better than anyone what John is going through. He appreciates it more than anyone and will honor that. John persevered. It wasn't perfect, but he persevered. He persevered because Jesus did, perfectly.