



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

THE THIRD  
SUNDAY OF  
ADVENT

December 11, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Last Sunday, Jo preached about anticipation, as, indeed, Advent is a time of anticipation. But anticipation has an evil twin. Do you know what it is? ... Expectation.

Jo and I always warn couples engaged in pre-marital counseling to beware of the expectations that will seem to appear out of nowhere and saturate their life together the moment they are married. Even if they have known each other since birth or lived together for years ... I actually met in college the woman whose mother had shared the room with my mother at Touro Infirmary in New Orleans when each of us was born. Imagine the potential for a Hallmark movie. That was eclipsed by the tall blond who sat in front of me in algebra class, but I digress.

Regardless, what we expect from a spouse is much different from what we expect from a boyfriend or girlfriend. Those expectations are products of our cultures and families. And they can be a crushing surprise that produces heartache and hard lessons in the compromise that marriage demands.

Imagine Meghan Markle's surprise that living with the royal family in the palace involved the same formality behind the walls as it did outside in public view. And consider the now well-publicized consequences. Expectations of family dynamics is a minefield.

Christmas is no different. Along with our joyous anticipation of Christmas comes expectations. Colored lights or white lights. Ham or turkey. Open presents Christmas morning or Christmas Eve, etc., etc., etc.

Now let's step back 2000 plus years. In Judea, we would find two competing prophets, who, incidentally, were cousins: John, who had become known as John the "baptizer," and the other named Jesus. And what did John call his cousin? He called him the Messiah. And could there be name more freighted with anticipation ... and expectation?

The hope and anticipation of the people of Israel for centuries had been the emergence of a great king from the family line of the iconic King David. The Psalms had pointed the way.

And the prophets added clarity. Isaiah asserts the hope and expectation of a king from the Davidic line who would establish the throne of David and his kingdom and “uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore” (Is 9:7). Jeremiah foresees the days when God “will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23:5). We can look back and know who that was to be. Who Isaiah and Handel would call, “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Is.9:6

And that, of course, created enormous expectation among a people who were at the time Christ was born living in the oppression and exploitation of Roman occupation.

Then here is Jesus, born in Bethlehem, the city of David’s line. He already is developing a following. He is preaching, teaching, exorcising, and healing. He is preaching the prophets’ message of caring for the widows and orphans. He is raising up the poor and the needy of all stripes and sizes. He is challenging the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the corruption of the Temple. He is becoming the paragon of righteousness and justice. He is lining up quite well with the Messiah envisioned by the prophets.

But then the tentacles of expectation start to creep into the populace. If this Messiah is to be the king, then he must be a powerful leader who will reestablish the people of Israel as mighty nation via insurrection and revolution. Imagine the disappointment and disillusionment when Jesus was led like a thief to Calvary and crucified like a criminal. All because circumstances of the time, rife with injustice, violent oppression, and exploitation seemed to cry out for an immediate and final conquest of any and all earthly powers that subjugated the people of Israel. But the kingdom Jesus espoused was the Kingdom of Heaven that would be brought to earth, not when righteousness and peace were imposed by violence, but when peoples and nations live righteously, when peoples and nations learn to live together in peace. When they see Jesus not as a powerful, victorious king, but, indeed, the prince of peace.

Which now, two weeks away from our annual celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Nativity of the Lord, poses for us again the question of what do we expect of Jesus. Do our expectations match what we know about Jesus. Or do they just reflect the circumstances of our lives? We might have to ask ourselves some hard questions.

We might even have to ask whether we know enough about Jesus. And even admit that we are afraid to ask. We might even have to admit that what Jesus expects of us is far more important than what we expect of him.