

When I was a little girl, my friends and I always played across the street from my house. Mr. and Mrs. Brown's house was right across the street had a big tree in the front yard right by the road. It was an old coral tree (not seen here in the NE) and it had big, smooth spreading branches – perfect for tree climbing. That was one of my favorite activities as a little girl. Around the base of the tree grew a big patch of ivy, the kind with big shiny leaves that had to constantly be cut back or it would try to take over the tree altogether. The Browns also had some lawn closer to their house which they kept carefully mown and watered.

One day my friends and I were playing some sort of game where we decided to take ivy leaves and spread them around the lawn. I have no recollection as to why we did that, we just “decorated” the lawn with leaves. Soon our mothers called us all to our homes for dinner and we ran back to our houses without another thought.

Pretty soon the phone rang. It was Mrs. Brown and she was evidently kind of unhappy about the state of her lawn. My mom sent me back across the street to pick up all those ivy leaves and put them in a trash bag. I guess Mrs. Brown didn't appreciate our artistry with the ivy. I was not too thrilled to have to do all the clean up by myself, but I did it and then went and knocked on the Brown's door. Mrs. Brown opened the door.

“I'm all finished, Mrs. Brown.”

“OK, Heidi. Good night.”

And she shut the door. What! I thought. She never even said thank you to me. I was now a little miffed. I went back home and told my mom and that Mrs. Brown didn't even thank me for picking up the leaves.

"Of course she didn't, Heidi. You were just doing what you should have done in the first place. She didn't have to thank you for that."

Oh, I thought, feeling rather sheepish. "Yea, I guess you're right."

I had been wrong to expect a thank you. If I had had my wits about me I should have thanked her for allowing all of us kids to play in their yard all the time. That was the other thing that I expected – that the Brown's yard was ours to play in any old time.

Expectations. They trip us up all the time. We expect things of our family, of our friends, of ourselves and of God. It's not wrong to have expectations, it's a good and natural thing to have things in mind that we look forward to that we know will happen with some assurance. +
+We expect that the sun will rise tomorrow.

+A child expects to be fed and clothed and given a safe place to live and grow.

+A worker rightly expects that certain levels of respect and trust exist between co-workers or else you can't get your work done.

+We expect electricity to flow into our homes when we've paid our bill.

+ You expect things of me too. Because you pay my salary you expect me to fulfill certain duties; be here on a Sunday morning, preach this sermon, keep office hours...to be your pastor. We count on all these things happening and we don't worry about them too much because we expect them.

But some things are unreasonable for us to expect:

That others will behave the way we think they ought to behave.

That people should believe the things we believe, or always do the things we think they should do. Those types of expectations usually get us in trouble because if they don't go the way we want them to, we are likely to be angry and disappointed.

That leads to the question What do we expect of God?

Does God behave the way we expect a high power to act? Has God lived up to our expectations? And what do we expect about Jesus?

This brings us to John the Baptist. This is a very different John than we saw last week, isn't it. John is no longer blasting away at the religious establishment and calling people to repent and be baptized. Now John sits in jail. King Herod arrested him and threw him in prison. We don't know if he knew what his fate was to be. We don't know, even from the historian Josephus, how long John was in jail before Herod had him beheaded.

But what we do know is that in our passage from Matthew today he is wondering about Jesus. He expected that Jesus was The Messiah. But Jesus wasn't living up to John's expectations because he was not acting like the kind of Messiah that John and many of the other Jews expected. He was just quietly going about the countryside teaching, healing and bringing good news.

Perhaps John expected a warrior as foretold by scripture. Our psalm this morning says, "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance and with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Maybe John thought that Jesus would literally come and save him; free him from prison. Jesus was later taunted at the cross; "If you are the messiah save us and save yourself." Clearly, some people expected Jesus to do things he could not or would not do.

Some have felt that Jesus' answer to John was a rebuke because Jesus did not answer John directly saying yes I am the one, or no I am not the one. Instead he sends the message, "Go and tell John what you see and hear," Jesus said. I don't think that was a rebuke. I think this is Jesus being his usual self. He never says about himself that he is The Messiah. In fact he

says that if someone does come and tell you “I am the Messiah” that you’d better be worried about him. That person is false.

What Jesus does instead is use language which John will understand as a fulfillment of the Hebrew scripture. This morning we even see in the passage from Isaiah and our psalm what that scripture is. Jesus simply says – “Just look at what is happening in people’s lives. You can call it what you will, but I’m just doing what I’m supposed to be about.” Jesus doesn’t want people to identify him with the built up expectations that all the Jews had for a Messiah who would come from God and change the world.

I think that somehow words which are very familiar to us – have lots of history, feed into our expectations, sometimes for the good and sometimes not. Think about our expectations for Christmas, or our expectations of Church, or even our expectations of God. The psalmist wants God to come and make everything better. And God did do that in Jesus, but perhaps not in the way that we expect. One way to not get stuck in our expectations with regard to certain words is to take all the baggage away from the word. How do we do that? By choosing different names to call God so that we don’t identify God with some unreasonable expectations we’ve had in the past.

In the ancient church beginning somewhere about the 8th century holy men and women began to sing what are called the “O antiphons”. Antiphon, by the way, is literally anti-voice. These days antiphons are a way of singing responses, usually between ourselves and the choir. These antiphons were written to give different ways of thinking about Jesus; different facets of his being and his oneness with God. If we are stuck thinking that Jesus is the teacher extraordinaire, we might forget that Jesus is all these other things.

In your bulletin you can see the original form of these O antiphons. They are numbered there as 2 through 8 because that is how they correspond to the verses in our hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel." Emmanuel means God is with us. Of course they were sung in Latin, and for many centuries were sung as antiphons to sections of the Magnificat. Religious men (and maybe women) sang The Magnificat every evening in Advent and, from Dec. 17 through Dec. 23 a different antiphon was used with the canticle. Here's the fun part. If you take the first letter of each thing that Jesus is in these antiphons, you will have the letters S, A, R, C, O, R, E. But if you read them backwards you have ERO CRAS. It's a secret message acrostic that you only have once you have reached Christmas eve eve. I decided this week to google those secret words "ero cras". There were many, many hits. If this is a secret message, well, the secret is out! There are a lot of people who are in on this one!

We have fun with secret messages, secret knowledge and secret codes. But the importance of all of this is to help us know better the one for whom we are waiting and expecting. We know the pitfalls of having unrealistic expectations. We wait expectantly for Jesus to be born on Christmas eve. Yes, of course that already happened 2000 years ago. So what can we expect this Christmas?

We can expect just what Jesus told John, we can expect what we see and hear: the blind will receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers will be cleansed, the deaf will hear, the dead will be raised and the poor will have good news brought to them. How can all this be? It's a mystery. But with God we've learned to expect that nothing is impossible.