WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

Tom Long, my worship and preaching professor years ago in seminary, reflected on our human nature to see what we expect to see. Tom reported that outside the little town of Grover’s Mill, NJ, is an old wooden water tower that still shows buckshot markings from over a seventy years. “What happened was that in the late 1930s Orson Welles broadcast on his live radio show a fictional account of Martians invading the earth, using a script from H. G. Wells’s story War of the World. The writers had picked, of all places, little Grover’s Mill as the site of the Martians’ landing, and when the radio show was broadcast, it was so realistic that people believed it was real news, not fiction. Frightened farmers in the area grabbed their shotguns and headed into town, looking for the Martians and their spacecraft. There in the moonlit October night, they looked up into the sky and spied the water tower. Seeing the spaceship they expected to see, they opened fire.”

We see what we expect to see. Our expectations shape our experience. We get what we expect, but sometimes our expectations blind us to what is really there and what we have received.

What attracted people out to the countryside to hear John the Baptist preach was not that he was a powerful preacher, or that he washed away their sins by baptism. They were attracted to John because he matched their expectations of what a prophet should be and say and do. In fact, John so perfectly matched the people’s expectations, that the rumor was floating around that he was the long-expected Messiah. “In the same way that the farmers of Grover’s Mill saw what they expected,” Tom Long offers, “the people standing on the banks of the Jordan looked at John and saw the figure for whom their hearts hungered. John looked like a religious-supply-house catalog Messiah; that’s what was expected and that’s what they saw.” (Long, 210)

Expectations can make us see something that isn’t there, but they can also blind us to what really is there. Barbara Brown Taylor describes an experiment in perception that shows how expectations can keep us from seeing:

Here’s how it goes. [The experimenters] sit you down at a table in front of an ordinary deck of cards and they flash six of them at you, asking you to identify them as fast as you can – nine of diamonds, three of hearts, jack of clubs – whoops! What was that one? Then they repeat the exercise, slowing it down a little so you can get the ones they missed the first time.

The third time is so slow that you think you must be an idiot because there is one card you simply cannot identify. You think you know what it is, but you are not sure, and it is not until the cards are laid on the table in front of you that you can see what the problem is.
The mystery card is a six of spades, only it is red, not black.
The deck has been fixed.
Someone has changed the rules,
rules that prevented you from seeing what was there.
You could not see a red spade because spades are supposed to be black.
Our expectations, however faithful, may prevent us from seeing what is there.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, 157.)

Jesus did not match the people’s expectations of the Messiah.
John the Baptist did.

John so perfectly matched their expectations that they overlooked Jesus.

The people expected a prophet like Jeremiah or Elijah, who rattled peoples’ cages and denounced the politicians, and what they got was an itinerant preacher who said things like “Blessed are the poor.”
They expected a great judge who would chop down and burn trees that do not bear fruit, and separate the wheat from stalk and burn up the enemies of the faithful. What they got was a roving preacher who taught love and forgiveness, and who healed people on the Sabbath.
They expected a warrior king like David who would ride into town on a white horse, overthrow their oppressors and restore the fortunes of the nation. What they got instead was a teacher who wept over Jerusalem, rode into town on a donkey, and got himself crucified. To quote Tom Long, “He was the red six of spades and people couldn’t see him because they expected something else.” …“Don’t look at me!” John the Baptist told the crowds, ”Despite your expectations, I am not the Messiah. I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals.” (Long, 212)

John the Baptist himself falls victim to expectations.
Just a few chapters later in Luke, Chapter 7, John hears of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners (5:30),
defending his disciples who pick grain on the Sabbath,
healing a man on the Sabbath,
teaching that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who abuse us.
John is not so sure that Jesus is the hoped-for one, after all.
“Are you the one who is to come,” he asks, “or are we to wait for another?” (LK 7:18)
Jesus was the red six of spades, violating John’s own messianic expectations.

Each year on this First Sunday after Epiphany we celebrate the baptism of Jesus and recall our own baptism. We reclaim God’s power at work in our lives. We rejoice in the benefits we have received…but we don’t expect and therefore neglect John the Baptist’s marching orders: “Live up to what has been given you! You’ve been made clean, so live clean, do what is right; be honest, share food and clothes with others, love and obey God.” (Luke 3:10-14).

Isaiah 42 also defies our expectations. We don’t get what we expect when God’s chosen one arrives…we get far better!
“A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench, he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Isaiah 42:3). Visualize cat tail reeds growing down by a lake or bayou. … If you pinch and crimp the stalk of a cat tail or a flower’s stem, it will flop over, no longer able to stand erect on its own. It cannot repair itself and rejuvenate. God’s servant does not come to pinch off and discard the injured, the sinful, the suffering, the jeopardized: but rather, God will repair and restore and heal.

“A dimly burning wick he will not quench...” He will not fault the candle or lamp wick that is struggling in earnest to burn; he will not snuff it out because it fails to accomplish what it is called to do; he will not snuff you out if you are weary in spirit and struggling in faithfulness. Rather Jesus comes to give air to your flame, to rekindle your flame, to return you to the brightness and vigor and passion that you once enjoyed.

Jesus says “I’ve been with you. I’ve seen what you’ve been through.
I’ve seen your sins rob you of strength – receive my strength.
I’ve seen chemotherapy weaken you – receive my help.
I’ve seen your sorrow – receive my joy.
I’ve see your doubts - receive my certainties.
You’re weak like a bruised reed, I understand that. I accept you as you are.
I won’t further bruise or break you.
Your faith is waffling, you are confused and hurting;
you’re overwhelmed by your situation and circumstances;
you feel depleted and defeated,
but I don’t want your lamp to flicker out!
I’ll not extinguish your wick struggling to burn.”
“Let me help you!” Jesus says. “Call on me, come to me, and let us begin again.”

Jesus is not what the crowds expected of their messiah. They did not get what they expected, they got far more! As do we!

- Jesus does not "lord" his superior knowledge or virtue over us. Instead, he identifies with us and our sins. He kneels in the muddy water of the Jordan River to be baptized to approve baptism as a sign and seal of God’s forgiveness.
- When he said he can and will help us to carry our burdens - he had already experienced the burdens and trials and tribulations that we do.
- When he said that trusting in God could help you overcome anxiety, - he had already trusted in God for his daily bread, his physical safety, and his spiritual power.
- People listened to Jesus not just because he understood and identified with them, but because he practiced what he preached. When he pointed out the way to God, he was already pursuing that way.
- He didn't just tell others to turn to God – he too sought God blessings at the River Jordan and in lonely places of prayer away from others, and in places of worship - the synagogues and the temple.
- He didn't just tell others to pray for people, he himself prayed for them; he prayed for his disciples before going out to the Garden of Gethesame. He asked them to pray for him.
• He didn’t just tell others to forgive each other: he forgave them even from the cross, “for they know not what they do.”
• He reached out and touched the lepers. He laid his hands upon the sick and anointed them with his prayers.
• Jesus did everything he asked others to do. And by this he gained their respect, their trust, they were more open to hearing him, and they were more open to God.

In Jesus, they did not get what they expected, they got far more! And so do we!

You don’t have to be perfect to be a follower of Jesus – you just have to be willing. When this world seems too much for you and you are weary, when the problems of war and ISIS and hunger and disease and hatred and violence and hopelessness seem too big for anyone to change, remember, you have been baptized, and God is with you to give you hope and stamina for the work God calls you to do, to be the person God intends you to become!

God knows your needs and will answer you.

In his book, Too Busy Not to Pray, writing about praying with expectancy, Bill Hybels writes, “If you bring a thimble to God, He’ll fill it. If you bring a bucket to God, he’ll fill that. If you bring a fifty-gallon barrel to God, he’ll fill that too. Which describes your expectations of God? A thimble, a bucket, or a barrel?” (Hybels, 89)

Jesus will not break bruised reed people, nor snuff out dimly burning wicks. But rather, he will bring you strength to endure and to overcome. Open your heart to him and he will hear you and answer you. Because he loves you as God loves you., and he affirms you, “You are my child, in who I am well pleased.”

Thanks be to God! Amen!

Sources