

Third Advent - A - 12/16/07 – Isaiah 35:1-7 – An Unexpected Surprise - Pastor Charlie

“What do you want for Christmas?” That question has been on our hearts and minds for the past month. As we go about buying gifts for people we love, it helps to know what’s on that person’s “wish list.” In exchanging gifts we hope to surprise, delight and satisfy the other person. In another two weeks, we’ll be asking, “What did you get for Christmas?” We’ll watch the facial expressions and listen to voice intonations to determine whether what was given met the recipient’s expectations.

I still remember the Christmas of my 10th grade year in high school. Component stereo systems had become more affordable. I really wanted one and made it the sole focus on my Christmas list. It was the only thing I talked about. My parents knew my love for classical music. They also knew I was willing to use my own money to finance half the cost. It was about a week before Christmas when I discovered the huge box in their closet. Of course it was wrapped. While it was heavy, it wasn’t as heavy as I thought it should be. My heart beat with excitement as I thought mom and dad had gotten me what I wanted. Well, you can imagine my surprise when, on Christmas Day, I tore open the package and discovered a nice, new suitcase! What I needed, “Probably.” What I wanted, “No.” There was no hiding the disappointment. And of course the lingering question remained: “Why didn’t you get me what I wanted and asked for?”

In today’s Gospel reading we hear John the Baptist ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” It’s a question that rises when expectations are not met, at least not in the way you had imagined. John had labored long and hard to prepare people for the coming of God’s Kingdom. John was a rugged character, living like an ascetic in the wilderness, eating locust and wild honey. His message was stern, non-nonsense, filled with judgment and consequences. Like the vision cast in Isaiah 34, John imagined that the Kingdom would come with violence, revenge and open warfare – a get even and settle-the-score with your enemies approach. That’s how it always had been. Why would it be any different now? But Jesus brought healing, non-violence and forgiveness – a settle-for-an-uneven-score and reconcile with your enemies approach. John was confused. This wasn’t what he had expected.

Jesus answers John’s question by quoting Isaiah’s words, but from chapter 35. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Jesus didn’t answer John’s question directly, nor was everyone healed and restored; some were and some were not. John would have to decide based on what he heard and saw. Therein lies a problem, both then and now. Not everyone perceives things the same way. Some see coincidences where others see miracles; some see natural causes and occurrences where others see the hand of God. Some see poverty and wonder how God can allow this to exist, while others respond to poverty by refurbishing houses, building with Habitat, and creating non-profit agencies to provide what is needed. Some see cancer eating away at family and friends and wonder how God could allow such suffering, while others volunteer with Hospice to comfort patients and families as they surround them with God’s love and compassion; others provide transportation to chemotherapy or provide childcare and meals. Some see starvation in the world and wonder why God doesn’t provide, while others realize there is enough food produced to feed the world’s people and work through agencies like Lutheran World Relief or Church World Services to find a means to get the food distributed. God’s Kingdom is coming; it is breaking in all around us. But do we see it; are we participating in it? It depends on what we’re expecting.

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” is a haunting question for our lives. What we see when we look at life depends on our faith perspective. Let me close with a story and ask: What do you see?

The story is about the Johnson family. Tikeyla is homeless. Her first husband is in jail; her second abused her before throwing her out of the house one night at 3:00 AM with her two boys, Anthony, 5, and Jaylin, 2. She managed to find a friend with whom to stay while she scrapped together the security deposit for an apartment. But she needed help with the first month’s rent, which is how we got involved. She had a new job. Her story was confirmed by the school social worker. After receiving the rent check, here is what she wrote to us: “The Johnson family, Anthony, Jaylin and I, would love to sincerely thank you. Not only have you helped my family

gain stability, you all have helped my family stay together, continue much-needed education, keep confidence and gain motivation. God bless you all for being so caring and giving. More importantly, thank you for believing in me as a person. Always feel free to monitor my family's progress."

Were Tikeyla's expectations met? Yes, but not without having to suffer. Did God hear her prayers and answer them? Yes, because people like us were willing to participate in God's ongoing work of redemption, rescuing people, helping them experience the coming of God's Kingdom. Was God's presence and help obvious? That depends on where you stand and how you see the world. For Isaiah and me, it is the fulfillment of his prophecy: "Here is your God! He will come and save you." God's saving help always comes as an unexpected surprise. Will you and I be able to recognize it when it comes to us?