

“Who Are You Expecting?”

Mary Kay Collins | December 3, 2006

Isaiah 11:1-10:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. This is the season when we are to wait expectantly for our Savior's birth. How difficult is that for you? Seriously, how many of you truly “practice advent”—practice waiting, hopefully expectant? Our world is so not set up for us to “practice advent.” I am as guilty of this as anyone. I always have big hopes that I will take time, make time every day throughout Advent to be quiet, to be prayerful, to truly remember the “reason for the season.”

I have failed miserably; I can't even take the time to spend the minute a day it takes to look at the advent calendar with my family.

Why is this so difficult for us? How come, as Christians, we can't take this time of the year and do something special? Probably for some of the same reasons that it is difficult for us to practice the disciplines during the season of Lent. Yeah, we might give up chocolate for the 40 days, but for us to daily retreat into the wilderness with Jesus and repent—this is difficult.

And we are so not set up for this in our society. What we are set up for is shopping, set up to be bombarded by ads, we are even set up to shop online, late at night or early in the morning (24 hours) and receive free shipping!

We are set up to feel pressured and overwhelmed by the financial pressures that this expensive season brings with it. But rarely are we in a position to prepare ourselves to receive the greatest gift ever, the gift of love, to open ourselves up to what the Messiah will show us, what direction the Christ child will lead us.

It is difficult for us to wait, to wait expectantly, but maybe it's because we do not know exactly what it is we are waiting for? Of course we know that Jesus Christ is born on Christmas day. But do we ever wonder what exactly it is we are waiting for—or more specifically, whom it is we are waiting for? What is the purpose of waiting?

Well, in this morning's Scriptures, we hear a longing from Isaiah and from John the Baptist, a longing for their world to be different. And they knew it was going to happen. They knew the Messiah was on the way.

The Prophet Isaiah lived around 700 years before Jesus' birth. He had endured over 40 years of war and he was tired of it. Listen again to his poetry in describing what it will be like when the Messiah comes:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

Isaiah isn't talking about animals getting along here; he's talking about people. And even 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah was far from the first to long for the Messiah; predictions of the Messiah go all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

So literally from the beginning of human history—or at least since eating the forbidden fruit—we have been longing for the One to come into the world and make things right.

And then the time draws near. John the Baptist, Jesus' immediate forerunner, urges people to be ready. He says the Messiah is coming to baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The culmination of thousands of years of expectation—expecting deliverance, expecting peace, expecting justice, expecting things to be right.

And who comes? Who is the Messiah people have been expecting for thousands of years?

A baby. A helpless little baby. Born where? A stable. Where is all the power, where is the glory? Then this baby grows up to be a carpenter who hangs out with the dregs of society, who doesn't follow all the religious laws, but who makes a stand against them.

Shouldn't he be making everything right? Shouldn't he sway his arm across the land and bring peace to everybody and every thing? Why doesn't this happen? And then poor old John the Baptist, making all this noise about how much more powerful Jesus will be than he is. And what does Jesus do? He asks John to baptize him!

The Messiah has come—the one the prophet Isaiah spoke of, the one we have been waiting for since the beginning of time, the one who will deliver us. Is this who they expected?

Jesus, not a man who makes the world right according to our wishes, but a man who teaches us how to live in a fallen world?

Not a man who triumphs and delivers his people, but a man who dies like a common criminal?

It certainly wasn't who John the Baptist expected. In the eleventh chapter of Matthew we have this:

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, '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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'

This is not what John was expecting.

And what about us? After all those thousands of years of expectation, it's not surprising that some people don't recognize the Messiah who came. It's easy for all of us—whether we say we believe in Jesus or not—to act as if Jesus never came in the first place.

We can be just like Isaiah and John the Baptist—longing for a different world than the one we've been given, except that now maybe it will be Jesus' Second Coming that will do the trick. I heard a Christian woman doing an interview once and she said: "I wish Christ would come again tomorrow." She wanted this world to end and for Christ to come now! Maybe some of you have felt that way?

Isaiah and John the Baptist had expectations of what the Messiah would be like, and we do too. Maybe you are like me and sometimes get stuck in those moments

of thinking: why is there so much bad when Christ is so good? How can I wait expectantly for the peace, hope and love that is promised this Christmas when I have my doubts if it will actually come?

Maybe we are hoping and expecting a Messiah who is different than the Messiah who shows up. Maybe the Jesus who comes is never quite who we expect?

It is my challenge to let Jesus show and shine in the way that he does. It might not be what I expect, but it is real. His light is real on this earth and though I might get stuck in the darkness, His light is there and it can overcome the darkness.

I have had glimpses of this light—I see this light when I get phone calls from members who ask for a way they can serve others this season: “Is there a family in need, or can I bring food to someone?”

I see this light when I see families gathered around the bed of a critically ill mother, sharing their love and compassion with one another, being vulnerable and open with each other.

I see this light when I know that there are cures being created to treat people with AIDS and cancer.

I see this light when I witness someone sharing the very good news of the Gospel.

I see this light when I know people are making a difference and seeking ways to feed the hungry and care for the poor.

I see this light when I talk to people who in the greatest despair still have faith, and still believe.

I see this light when we gather around this table together—this mysterious meal, this group of strangers—coming together to receive the love and forgiveness offered us and then filled up to go out as transformed people and share it with this world.

Who are you expecting this Advent, this Christmas? Do you believe that the Messiah brings hope, peace, and love? Are you willing to accept these gifts knowing that this could change you and how you live?

The world is in a challenging way—wars, pain, darkness—how will Christ’s light shine through? Will we pay attention enough to see it? Will we then share it with others? This Advent season, I pray that we will be open to the power of this Messiah who comes to us as a babe, that we will prepare ourselves for the way God will use us to be God’s hope, peace and love in this broken world.