

What Did You Expect?

Third Sunday of Advent – Year A

Catholic San Francisco – December 10, 2010

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

Psalms 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

In the fantasy film, "Willow", the characters are introduced to a magical enchantress of whom they had heard so much, one who would aid them in their quest, the great Fin Raziel. However, much to their disappointment, she had long since been transformed into a ferret by the evil empress. When she is first seen by two of the characters, equally small in stature, their disillusionment is apparent -- "I expected something a little more grand; less...fuzzy!"

With the expectation of Israel's liberation from the Roman Empire, many contemporaries of Jesus expected a great military leader to ride triumphantly at the head of an army to drive out the Roman legions. The last thing they expected in a so-called Messiah, an anointed one called to free his people, was a simple, middle-class carpenter from Nazareth. Even as Jesus hung from the cross, the skepticism continued -- "So you are the one who was going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days!" (Matt 27:40), "Let him save himself if he is the Messiah," (Luke 23:35). Even some of the men who would eventually become His Apostles first reacted to Jesus with skepticism -- "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Even John the Baptist, after such dramatic preaching, preparing the way of the Lord, found himself asking questions regarding the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth when he sends a delegation to ask what would be the last question we would expect the Baptist to ask -- "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Matt 11:3). Perhaps John the Baptist, himself, expected something a little grander in Jesus than what he got. His question reflects an apparent confusion, or at the very least, a crestfallen curiosity.

Jesus regularly challenges the expectations of Israel against what they got in both His preaching and the preaching of John the Baptist. What was it they expected? What was it that ultimately attracted their followers? When Jesus sends his reply to John, he turns to the crowds in a teaching that expresses deep understanding in John's question. He reminds the people of their own attraction to John's preaching. He reminds them that they did not go into the desert to listen to a nobleman; that one does not find a sophisticated individual living in the wilderness. Rather, they were drawn by the words and zeal of a wild-man; and they found in John, the "voice crying out in the wilderness." Yet, Jesus further asserts, there is no one, born of woman, who is greater than this wild prophet of the desert.

How much more is the Messiah and Savior to be found, not among the grand finery of polite society, not among the elite intellectuals and academic pillars of knowledge and learning, not among the icons of political power and military might? Despite their expectations of a political liberator, the people were nonetheless drawn to a healer, a preacher of the kingdom, one who associated with the poor and the sinner, the

downtrodden and the despised; a man of modest background, this carpenter from Nazareth, who would liberate his people not through mighty military victories, but by shedding Himself completely, according to the will of his Heavenly Father, even to surrendering to Death on a Cross.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of that Savior, not in luxurious royalty in a great capitol city, but, in a modest working class family in a small town, we might ask ourselves during our observance of Advent, 2011: What do we expect in the Savior as we await his Return in Glory? Do we expect great signs in the sky and displays of power and might over creation and civilization? May we perhaps, instead, witness His Great Return in a manner less grand? -- more simply, more modestly, and in a context in which that return would hardly be noticed by the world; and, as such, be all the more unexpected.

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