Matthew 11:2-15

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” [SLIDE]

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ [SLIDE]

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 Let anyone with ears listen!”
I haven't been to the movies in more than two years. I'm pretty sure that the last movie I saw in a movie theater was *The Muppets*, and that was in November 2011. The fact that I can tell you the month and year should show you how rarely I go to the movies. I went to see *The Muppets* only because it was with a group from my old church. It's not that I don't enjoy watching movies. I do, often repeatedly. The other night *The Return of the King*, the third movie in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, was on TV, and despite having seen it multiple times, and even owning the DVD, I watched it yet again. The reason I don't go to the movies more often has to do with expectations.

The average ticket price of a movie in New York City is now $15. For 3D and iMax movies, the price goes up to $20. For that amount of money I want to make certain, as much as I can, that I will enjoy the movie. So I will read multiple movie reviews to see what the critics think. I'll watch every version of the trailer that the studio releases. I will listen to word of mouth from friends who saw the movie. In short, I treat purchasing a movie ticket like making an investment in a stock. I do as much research as I can so that I make a wise investment. I don't want to waste $15 on a bad movie.

The problem with this approach is that when a movie does meet all of my criteria, my expectations are set too high. I expect to see a good movie, so if my expectations are not met, I leave the theater disappointed. That is the danger of great expectations.

Some people choose to take the opposite approach—my father, for example. My father is a sports fan, but he really doesn't enjoy watching sports. He doesn't enjoy it because of the possibility that the team he roots for might lose. My family is from Connecticut, a small state that has no professional men's sports teams. What Connecticut
does have is the University of Connecticut, or UConn, which has one of the best men's (and women's) basketball teams in the country. The men's team has won three national championships since 1999. They are almost always ranked among the best teams in the country. Despite this, while watching UConn play on TV, my father will abandon all hope of the team's chances of winning if they are losing 2-0 in the first minute. "Oh, that's it. The game's over now."

The same holds true in baseball. Although he is from Pennsylvania, close to Philadelphia, my father somehow became a fan of the New York Yankees. I don't know how familiar you are with American baseball, but I imagine you've heard of the Yankees. The Yankees win the World Series almost every year. At least it seems that way to fans of every other team. Yankee fans, on the other hand, consider the World Series their birthright. The Yankees are the gold standard, not only for baseball teams, but for sports franchises of any kind. They have won 27 World Series, after all! Like Korean students who receive a B grade, the Yankees consider second place failure. (I hope that didn't come across as mean. I meant it in humor. I once had a Bible study student who was grounded by his parents for receiving a B+.) Despite their annoying tendency of winning, the Yankees, according to my father, cannot overcome the slightest deficit. While watching the Yankees on TV, my father will consider the game lost if they are losing 2-0 in the first inning. "It's over. That's too much. They'll never come back from that." Then he changes the channel to watch something else.

He's gotten better over the years, and I am slightly exaggerating, but my father has a method to his madness, or a method to his sadness, perhaps is more appropriate. He sets his expectations so low in the hope that when he turns the channel back, or reads the sports section in the newspaper the next day, he will hear about or read about the "miraculous" comeback that the Yankees made from that impossible 2-0 deficit. For my father, low expectations are the key to happiness, at least when it comes to watching sports. [SLIDE]
Today's scripture from Matthew is all about expectations. There are expectations about the Messiah on the part of John; expectations about John on the part of the people who come to him in the wilderness; and finally there are expectations about the kingdom of heaven. In each case those expectations did not match reality. However great were the expectations, the reality was, in fact, much greater. [SLIDE]

At the start of this passage we learn that John is in prison. John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee, the region where Jesus began his ministry. For clarity's sake, Herod Antipas is not the Herod the Great of the birth narrative of Jesus, but his son. After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among his three sons, with Herod Antipas being given Galilee. Herod put John in prison because John spoke out against Herod's marriage to Herodias, who was his brother Philip's wife. John objected to the marriage because not only had Herod divorced his wife to marry her, but Herodias also happened to be Herod’s niece. The full story of John's imprisonment and execution at the hands of Herod can be found in chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel. [SLIDE]

Even in prison John has received word about the activity of one Jesus of Nazareth. John is not altogether unfamiliar with Jesus, of course, since he baptized him, as recorded in Matthew chapter 3. However, John seems to have some doubts as to whether Jesus is really the Messiah. After all, as we heard last week, John had preached about one who would come with a winnowing fork in his hand, separating the wheat from the chaff. For John, the Messiah is one who comes in judgment. This Jesus, however, seems to be a more complicated figure, performing acts of mercy, while also speaking of judgment on the rich and powerful. So John sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is, in fact, the one to come or whether they should expect someone else. In other words, John had his expectations of how the Messiah would act, but Jesus wasn't meeting those expectations. Jesus was greater than John's expectations of what the Messiah would be.
When John's disciples reach Jesus and ask him if he is the one, Jesus doesn't give them a simple "yes." Instead he points to what he has done: given sight to the blind; healed the lame; cleansed the lepers; caused the deaf to hear; raised the dead; and preached good news to the poor. These were not the acts of judgment that John likely expected to accompany the Messiah's arrival. Jesus balances judgment with acts of mercy. [SLIDE]

The crowds that flocked to John had their own expectations of who John was. They believed him to be a great prophet. After John's disciples leave, Jesus playfully engages the crowd about their expectations of John. "What did you go out in the wilderness to look at?" he asks. "A reed shaken by the wind?" In English there's an expression "to blow with the wind." To blow with the wind is not to have any convictions but to go along with whatever is popular at the moment. So the image of a reed swaying in the wind implies a lack of principle—a blowing back and forth with whatever direction the wind is blowing. Jesus is using humor because he knows full well that John was nothing if not a man of firm principle.

Jesus then asks the crowd, "If not a reed shaken by the wind, what then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft robes?" Again, Jesus knew full well that John's camel-hair clothing did not mark him as a dedicated follower of fashion. John was an ascetic—someone who denies himself the comforts of life, such as fine food or clothing. Jesus knew this. He tells the crowd, "Those who wear soft robes are in kings' palaces."

"Then what did you go out to see?" he asks. "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." While the crowds may have followed John out into the wilderness because they thought he was a great prophet, Jesus tells them that that doesn't fully capture who John is. More than a prophet, John is the one of whom scripture speaks when it says in Malachi:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."
In other words, the crowds may have expected to see a great prophet, but what they were in fact seeing was the forerunner to the Messiah. John was greater than their expectations of him. [SLIDE]

The third set of expectations has to do with the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has just told the crowd of John's greatness. Yet he then tells them that as great as John is, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. What sort of kingdom is this? What sort of people will be greater than the greatest prophet?

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew. The other gospels speak of the kingdom of God. The two phrases mean the same thing. Matthew was likely a Jewish convert to Christianity, and Jews never write the name of God. Even today religious Jews will substitute a hyphen for the letter "o" when writing "God." Thus, Matthew, not wanting to write God, speaks of the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of God.

As for those who reside in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says more about them elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel:

- “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Mat. 5:3)
- “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Mat. 5:10)

When the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (the disciples are like pastors, always concerned that someone might be greater than they are), he calls a child over to him and says [SLIDE]:

- “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Mat. 18:3-4)
Showing that they still did not grasp Jesus' teaching, unbelievably the disciples try to stop little children from approaching Jesus, but Jesus tells them:

- “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Mat. 19:14)

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is not measured in money or power, and not in one's reputation for serving God or even in one's proximity to Jesus (for who was closer to Jesus than the disciples?). No, the mark of greatness in the kingdom of heaven is one's ability to show childlike humility. [SLIDE]

That is not what the disciples were expecting to hear. If it were, they would not have tried to prevent children from coming to Jesus. Despite their proximity to Jesus, despite having heard him preach on the kingdom of heaven, the disciples were still too enamored with the kingdom of this world, a kingdom of the self, in which the self reigns. In the kingdom of the self, God is still worshipped, the Gospel is still proclaimed, but a voice inside is always whispering, “What about me? Am I being recognized?”

One of the marks of adolescence—the teenage years—is that children seek to develop an identity independent of their parents. Perhaps the most embarrassing thing that can happen to an adolescent in America is to be seen in the company of one’s parents on school grounds. In America, a lot of students are driven to school by one of their parents, usually their mother. Some teens will even ask to be dropped off a block or two from the school so that they won’t be seen by their fellow students. This is why getting a driver’s license is such a rite of passage in America. With a car comes independence and an identity distinct from one’s parents. My oldest niece turns 16 next month and is already looking forward to taking driver’s lessons.

I don’t think that Jesus had anything against teens—and the concept of teenager certainly did not even exist in Jesus’ day—but when highlighting the quality displayed by those in the kingdom of heaven,
Jesus cites little children. Children, especially young children, happily associate themselves with their parents. They are dependent on their parents for everything—food, shelter, safety, and even play. But theirs is a joyful dependence. Children receive their identity through their parents and take comfort in knowing that they are loved by, and belong to, their parents.

I think that Jesus is saying something similar of us. If we are preoccupied with how we are perceived by others, or whether we are perceived, we are in effect asserting our independence from God. In doing so we lose sight of the God who has already claimed us, the God who has blessed us by calling us to him, the God who comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Young children are also remarkably trusting of their parents. This is the point in the sermon where, if I had children, I would tell you a short story showing how trusting they can be. I don’t have children, but I do have seven nieces and nephews. My oldest nephew, Thomas, is now 24. When he was about four years old, we were playing in the back yard of my parents’ house, throwing a ball around. I would throw the ball up on the roof and have Thomas try to catch it when it came rolling back. My parents’ house was two stories high. Thomas being only about 100 cm tall, could not see up to the roof and so asked me how it was that the ball kept coming back to us.

I don’t know what inspired me, but rather than explain the concept of gravity to him I told him that Batman was up on the roof, catching the ball and throwing it back to us. I could see his four-year-old brain trying to contemplate that. I suspect it sounded unlikely to him, but here was his uncle, whom he trusted, telling him that Batman was on the roof of his grandparents’ house. “Really?” he asked in wonder. I decided to double down on my nephew’s innocence. “Of course! How else do you think the ball keeps coming back to us? Magic?”

Joyful dependence and open-hearted trust toward their parents come naturally to young children. That is the type of relationship that Christ invites us to have with him. It doesn’t mean that we don’t ever have
doubts, or don’t sometimes question God’s activity in our life. It means that those doubts and questions occur within the context of a dependent and trusting relationship. [SLIDE]

In verse 12 Jesus tells the crowd that the kingdom of heaven is subject to violence. Not everyone can accept being in a relationship of dependence, so strong is their desire to be independent, even to their own detriment. Not everyone can trust in something greater than themselves. To some people the kingdom of heaven is something to be resisted, even violently resisted. I think that Jesus already knew, and was even suggesting to the crowd, that the cross awaited him.

Little did the crowd expect that the Messiah, their savior, would deliver them not from the Romans but from sin. Little did they expect that his reign would begin by dying on a cross. Little did they expect that his kingdom would gather in not the great but the humble of heart.

God so often works that way, defying our expectations. God is at work in our lives now, but perhaps not in ways that we expected. That is as it should be. However great our expectations, God is greater.