

Great Expectations
Matthew 4:12-25

In the era of COVID-19, we have no difficulty understanding why great multitudes followed Jesus. In spite of our amazing medical expertise and technology, we're still a long way from finding a cure for this virus. Indeed, viruses from the flu and the common cold to HIV and Ebola have befuddled our most knowledgeable doctors and researchers for years, through their ease of mutation and their ability to hijack the body's own cells to reproduce themselves. So if we knew someone who could instantly cleanse us of viruses, not to mention someone who could heal epileptics and paralytics and those possessed by demons with only a word or a touch, I think we'd all join the great multitudes in beating a path to his door.

No, it's no wonder that crowds came to Jesus from as far away as Syria in the north and Judea in the south and even from across the Jordan River to the east. But they weren't just coming to Jesus for healing. They were coming to Him because of what all that healing proved about Him – that He was the Messiah predicted by so many of the Old Testament prophets.

For what did Isaiah 35 say this Messiah would do when He came to reveal the glory of the Lord and the majesty of God? "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy" (verse 5). And that's exactly the sort of healing that Jesus did throughout His ministry, isn't it? His miraculous power over even the worst diseases made it obvious that He was the One for Whom God's people had been waiting for so long.

But the great multitudes didn't just want to be healed – they were also hungry to be set free from the power of their enemies. They were longing for God to administer justice to those like the Romans who had been oppressing them for so long. And Isaiah 35 said that the Messiah would do that as well: "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you" (verse 4).

And just to make sure we understand Jesus is in fact the long-awaited Messiah, in verses 15 and 16 of today's passage Matthew quotes from Isaiah chapter 9, another prophecy of His coming. In verse 4 of our responsive reading, God says that the One Who will reign on the throne of David will break the yoke of His people's burden, "and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. For every boot of the booted warrior in the *battle* tumult, And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire."

And didn't John the Baptist say similar things about Jesus' might and majesty back in Matthew chapter 3? "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12).

So there can be no doubt that the great multitudes were not just looking for healing but for freedom from their Roman overlords. They were longing for the day that the Messiah would rule in the righteous and just way that John and Isaiah had predicted that He would: "And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Now, we know all this is true. We've read all these beautiful prophecies – we've heard or even sung Händel's setting of many of them at Christmas time for years. We know Jesus is the promised Messiah, the child born to us, the Son of David and the Son of God given up for us so that our sins might be forgiven. We know Who Jesus is.

But what exactly do we expect our Messiah to do for us? More specifically, what parts of Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 9 are we expecting Jesus to give us when we pray? Especially during this COVID crisis, we often pray for health and healing for ourselves or our loved ones. Our recent economic shutdown has caused many of us to pray that God would provide jobs for us. As violence fills our streets, we pray for safety for those who are caught in the crossfire and for justice for those who do harm to others. Parents and grandparents pray for their children and grandchildren to come to know the Lord, and to devote their lives to His service and the service of others. And there's nothing wrong with praying for God to bless us in these or many other ways.

But what do we do when God doesn't grant our requests? How do we feel when a loved one isn't healed or when a job offer doesn't come through, or when a child goes astray or when a relationship breaks down in bitterness? Isn't it easy in our disappointment to start doubting that Jesus really is the one John and Isaiah were talking about? When we lose the peace or the prosperity or the safety or the justice we crave, isn't it easy to doubt all the promises God has made to us?

Sure it is, but this isn't just a problem for us modern Christians. No, from the very beginning, Jesus was sending two seemingly contradictory messages – that He possessed endless power and authority, but at the same time that it was not His plan to make all the worldly circumstances of our lives perfect. In other words, He came to this world to bless us, but not completely, not right now. Even for the people who saw Him face to face during His first coming, many of His blessings were reserved for His second coming.

And no, He didn't just hold out on those whose faith was somehow lacking. That's what the peddlers of the false "Health and Wealth" gospel tell us. They say that all we have to do is name a blessing and claim it from God, and God will give it to us – if our faith is great enough. And of course, what better way could there be to demonstrate the strength of our faith than to send in a sacrificial donation to pay for that perfectly coiffed hair and capped teeth and private jets?

But John the Baptist obviously believed in Jesus. In Matthew chapter 3, John confessed that Jesus was in fact the One Whom he said would be greater than he, the One Who would baptize people with the Holy Spirit. And after he baptized Jesus, John heard the voice from Heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." John knew who Jesus was – and yet John was put in prison precisely because he was so faithful to the truth, precisely because he wouldn't sugar-coat the need for even the most powerful people to repent and turn to God.

Yes, John trusted Jesus. John publicly confessed his faith in Jesus. But John ended up in prison – and Jesus never came to get him out. John died at the hands of a capricious, wicked ruler, and the Son of David, the Prince of Peace did not put a stop to that terrible injustice. In short, the very first verse of this passage should prove to us that Jesus did not, in fact, come to deliver all the promises of Isaiah 9 and 35, He did not come to grant everyone the health and wealth, the peace and prosperity and freedom that we crave – at least not right now.

And that's why He called the sorts of followers that He did. After all, if He had done what the great multitude had expected Him to do, if He had come to set up a worldly kingdom on this earth, He would have conducted a royal progress through the land, recruiting only the bravest warriors and

wisest, most respected counsellors to serve Him. But in stark contrast to this, we see the divine, miracle-working Son of God calling four fishermen to be His first disciples.

In fact, Matthew underlines this same point in verses 14-16, with his quote from Isaiah chapter 9. For Jesus didn't reveal Himself in Jerusalem, the seat of religious and political power. Instead, He allowed the light of God to shine first in Galilee – a place where Jews lived side-by-side with Gentiles, a culturally marginal area. Galilee wasn't the swankiest of addresses: to those who lived in Jerusalem, to those who considered themselves to be the good and the great, well, Galilee was impure and unsophisticated – much like those common, unlearned fishermen Jesus called to follow Him.

No, we cannot deny it: Jesus did not come to promise His followers social standing or respect in the eyes of the powerful and influential. Moreover, He did not come to make sure we were all financially comfortable. For think about what He was calling these four young men to do. He asked them to leave the only trade they knew, the only way they knew how to make money. Moreover, He asked them to leave all their possessions behind them, their nets and their boats. James and John had to leave their father, risking his disapproval and disappointment. And remember, John the Baptist preached Christ and ended up in prison. That's not exactly why those in that great multitude were flocking to see Jesus. That's not exactly what those health and wealth preachers are promising, is it?

But we can't escape that rather sobering truth: if Jesus calls us to follow Him and to believe His Word, regardless of what the wealthy and powerful may think of us, He also calls us to radical dependence on Him, regardless of the circumstances of our lives. He isn't promising to give us everything we want in this world – but He does promise to give us what we need in order to carry out the mission to which He has called us.

And what is that mission? The great multitude wanted Him to bring Heaven to Earth right then, to bring an instant end to all injustice and oppression – in much the same way as so many of those angry, frustrated young people marching in our streets do. But again, that obviously wasn't what He had in mind. The health and wealth preachers think it's all about us gaining riches and happiness while they line their pockets with our gifts, but worldly riches certainly weren't high on Jesus' agenda either. Instead, He called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to stop fishing for fish and to start fishing for men, to give up their focus on material blessings and to seek instead to draw others to Christ, to help others see Jesus for Who He really is.

And didn't Isaiah at least hint at the same thing in chapter 9, which Matthew quotes in verse 16? "The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned."

For you see, Jesus didn't come to destroy the darkness, at least not completely, not until He comes again. That's when He'll finally fulfill all the rest of Isaiah chapter 9 and chapter 35, bringing all the health and wealth, all the peace and prosperity, all the justice and righteousness we all crave. No, for now, He has simply come to shine a light into the darkness. And He calls all who follow Him to do the same thing.

For no matter what the great multitude wanted, we are not called to serve the Prince of Peace by fighting for Him with swords and spears, with angry words and violent deeds. Instead, He calls us to be fishers of men, to present the claims of Christ and patiently wait for those who are in darkness to come to the light that we are steadily, faithfully, patiently shining. It's not our job to try to force the issue, to try to compel everyone to see things our way, or even to fix everything that's wrong with the world. It's enough for us to show the world Who Jesus is – with our lips as well as with our lives, loving those around us while we tell them the good news of God's grace.

And so, in starting His ministry in Galilee and in calling four fishermen to be His first disciples, Jesus proves that following Him isn't about being respected or influential, being healthy or wealthy, being forceful or powerful. If that's what you want, you need to go find another preacher to tell you the lies you want to hear.

For the truth is that following Jesus simply means sharing the same gospel that John preached and that Jesus preached. Following Jesus means living a life of repentance and calling others to do the same thing, to kneel before the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Because, no matter how dark and chaotic this world may seem, the truth is that Jesus already reigns on the throne of David and over His kingdom. So we are simply called to shine the light of His truth and His love into the confusion and the hatred all around us, to announce the free gift of His gracious pardon even to self-centered sinners like us, even if they aren't particularly interested, at least not at first.

That's Who Jesus is. And that's what Jesus is calling us to do. Will we follow Him?