Are You the One?

Sermon preached by Jennifer Hudson, St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Bethel, CT, December 14, 2025

"Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" This question John the Baptist poses in this morning's Gospel sounds a bit like the internal monologue of someone out on a date. While John is certainly not on the lookout for love and romance, he is in search of the Messiah. But the one he gets doesn't match his expectations.

If you've spent any time searching for love on dating apps (think: Hinge or Facebook Dating or OK Cupid) the question especially resonates. Substitute the pronoun "we" with "I" for a moment and you can just hear the resounding disappointment within "Am I to wait for another?" Our current digital era complicates dating, making getting to know someone beyond their surface difficult. As therapist Emily Jamea puts it, "the advent of dating apps fundamentally changed how people find and evaluate each other and form relationships. While dating was once grounded in serendipity, social circles, and face-to-face interactions, it has become a web-based process fueled by a return-on-investment mentality."[1] We're swiping through profiles on our smartphones—profiles that not only feature photos of that individual doctored by filters, but also playful and enticing bios that have been written with the help of AI. If someone appeals to us, we might begin a text conversation with the person through the app's chat feature. Sometimes these chats are brief. Sometimes phone numbers, then text messages, photos, videos, and audio messages are exchanged. We're feeling hopeful if we get to the stage when we agree to meet face-to-face and we're questioning until that first date, "Is this person the

[1] Emily Jamea. "The New Rules of Dating," Psychology Today, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/202505/the-new-rules-of-dating?msockid=3128737773576c2b104265d9728c6dfb

one?" And when we meet face-to-face, we're surprised when the conversation starts feeling like a job interview. We sense our date is assessing us. We're assessing them in the moment too. And our assessment starts to be that they aren't what we expected and we're not exactly what they expected either. This gets confirmed when we don't hear from our date again, and we say to ourselves, with frustration and hurt, "I guess I'm to wait for another."

In a similar way, John the Baptist is expecting Jesus to be a certain type of Messiah and is disappointed when the one he gets doesn't match his expectations. John's already created a profile for Jesus that even AI couldn't think up or enhance: one who is to bring fiery judgment on the wicked, a Messiah, as we heard last week, with "an axe at the root of the trees" and a "winnowing fork" who will gather the wheat and burn the chaff with "unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:10-12). John anticipates an apocalyptic Messiah who will bring about a political and moral overhaul. What John gets, however, is someone who heals and reconciles and restores in various ways the same people John considers the chaff.

Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another? Perhaps the most haunting thing about John's question is the disillusionment with which it resounds. This is the same John the Baptist who got waist-deep in water to baptize Jesus and even heard the voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son." It's not as though John wasn't aware of Jesus's identity. It's not as though he knew of Jesus only through an app or social media or word of mouth. He's been in Jesus's presence. He's interacted with him. He's heard the voice from heaven. And, as the first line in Matthew's Gospel points out, "John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing" (Matt 11:2). The Messiah. I think Matthew's text indicates here that John already knows Jesus is the Messiah. Why, then, the doubt? Why, then, the question "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Let's put ourselves in John's sandals for a moment. He's sitting in prison and it must be wearing him down. The same four dingy walls day after day, his only contact being the person who gives him what must be lousy meals. He's gone from proclaiming his grandiose vision of the Messiah to meeting that person in real life and realizing that person didn't fit or measure up to his expectations. John probably feels foolish. He probably spends too much time with his own thoughts while in isolation. He probably also wants his release from captivity, and Jesus, the Messiah, isn't taking down Israel's oppressors, which would ultimately free John from prison. Instead, Jesus is spending time healing misfits and sinners. John probably feels confused and abandoned (or "ghosted" as we would say in the online dating world). His disappointment must be running deep.

John the Baptist isn't alone in expecting someone different in Jesus after all the hype. Religious leaders such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees also had their set of expectations. The Pharisees, who believed in the importance of both the written and oral law of the Torah, were anticipating a Messiah who would match their interpretation of righteousness, not someone who would challenge their authority. The Sadducees, the elite who controlled the Temple and cooperated with Rome, were expecting a figure who would align with Temple authority and not disrupt their political arrangements. Even society-at-large was expecting a warrior-king like David and Jesus didn't take any political or military roles.

Everyone's disappointed in one way or another with who Jesus is. Everyone is expecting some kind of vision or profile that flashes before them (though maybe not on a smartphone) only to get something unexpected. How many times have we been John the Baptist, or the Pharisees or Sadducees, or society-at-large, encountering another person with preconceived notions and expectations of who they are? The immigrant bagging our groceries who doesn't speak English.

The coworker we wish would be more organized. The person we've met on the dating app that has us feeling "meh." How have we prejudged them? How have we disappointed them by denying them a chance at showing us the beauty of who they really are versus what we expect of them? And how many times have we done this to Jesus when a prayer isn't answered in the way we hope or God doesn't intervene in the way we expect? How many times in our disappointment have we doubted Jesus?

Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another? Consider how Jesus answers John's question. Jesus doesn't say "Yes, I am the one!" Instead, Jesus narrates a litany of his actions, which the disciples are supposed to recount to John in prison. Jesus lets his actions speak for themselves, actions such as the blind receiving their sight and the lame walking that we hear in Isaiah 35. Jesus understands that actions speak louder than words or titles. Jesus understands that actions reveal the truth of who someone is. The immigrant who might bag with a smile. The coworker who might be a great team builder. The "meh" match from the app who wants to build a genuine relationship. God can work in ways we don't expect, but it doesn't mean God isn't still active and present.

Advent is a time of anticipation, but it's also an opportunity for us to leave behind some of the expectations that put other people and God in boxes. Holding others and God up to our own expectations can set us up for disappointment. But when we open our hearts and minds and release those expectations, that's when beauty happens. That's when God works unobstructed. That's when God proves God is the One. And with God, we can be assured, we never have to wait for another.