

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 11, 2022

ISAIAH 35:3-10 | PSALM 146:5-10 | JAMES 5:7-10 | MATTHEW 11:2-11

We're spending these four weeks of Advent thinking about prayer using this book by James Martin called *Learning to Pray*. Two weeks ago, we talked about how prayer transforms us and our world. Last week, we talked about the role of honesty in prayer. And today, we're going to move toward the end of his book where Martin talks about some of the difficulties of prayer. And one of the difficulties he talks about is the pressure of expectations.

Expectations are a natural part of life. If you start an educational certificate or degree program, you have expectations about what you're going to learn. If you start playing a new sport, you expect you'll improve as you practice. If you find a new recipe online you want to try, you expect it will turn out something like the picture.

And it's much the same with prayer. When we pray, we have expectations. We might expect a specific outcome. In the prayers of intercession this week, we pray for an end to violence and oppression, and we expect that to be a possibility. Or maybe we expect a certain feeling. If I go on a weekend prayer retreat, I might expect that I'll have some spiritual insight or feeling of closeness with God by the end of it.

And sometimes those expectations are met. Sometimes we feel like our prayers have been answered. Or you come back from the retreat feeling reoriented toward your life. That's great.

But the more pressing question, the question Martin is getting at, is what happens when those expectations aren't met. Martin writes, "You may go for days or even months without discernible results in prayer, at least results that you can see. You may go on a retreat without some great epiphany—or no epiphany at all. You may sit down (or kneel or lie down) for your full hour and not feel much of anything."

When our expectations aren't met, our initial impulse is often to just stop. And in many parts of our life, we do. If the certificate program isn't what you expected or the sport isn't what you thought or the recipe is definitely not looking anything like the picture, you just admit it isn't working and do something else with your time.

But this is different with prayer. Martin reminds us that "the fruits of prayer are in the hands of God. So part of the spiritual life is managing your expectations." Notice that Martin doesn't say "lowering your expectations" but "managing your expectations." Managing your expectations can take many different forms. To begin with, it can mean acknowledging that we have expectations. Maybe even writing them down if it helps. It could mean looking at them critically. *Is this a reasonable expectation for me to have?*

Another part of managing our expectations—this is the more interesting one—is by not allowing our expectations to constrain our vision. It's easy to think that if my expectations aren't being met, there isn't anything going on. But if the fruits of prayer are in the hands of God, there may be something good happening that I'm just not thinking of as a possibility or that I'm not paying any attention to.

The relationship between expectations and vision is also at the heart of today's gospel reading. This reading finds John the Baptist in prison. And while he's there, he hears about the "works of Jesus," all of these miracles and teachings and healings that Jesus is doing. So John sends his disciples out to ask Jesus if he really is the messiah.

It's worth just pausing here to think about this because it's sort of counterintuitive. After all, what is John known for? Preparing the way of the Lord. Going out in the wilderness and telling people

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

that the messiah, the anointed one of God is coming. John is expecting the messiah. But even John the Baptist looks at the ministry of Jesus, and says, “It’s not exactly what I had in mind.” Matthew doesn’t tell us why, so we’re left to fill in the details. Perhaps John didn’t expect Jesus to welcome sinners and tax collectors the way he did. Or maybe John expected Jesus to speak of his own identity more openly. John might not be skeptical of Jesus, but he’s certainly surprised by his ministry.

So John’s disciples go to see Jesus, and Jesus affirms that, yes, he is the one that John was preparing the people for. Jesus might not act like they expected or talk like they expected or view himself the way they expected. But he’s still the one John was preparing for. And notice how Jesus explains himself. He doesn’t make an argument about his identity. He simply tells them to look at his ministry. “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.”

John’s disciples expect Jesus to give them a “yes” or “no” answer. *These are our expectations for the messiah. Do you check enough boxes?* But instead of fitting his ministry into their expectations, Jesus gives them an invitation. As if to say that if you want to understand who I am, you need to come and see what I’m doing. If John’s disciples want certainty, a way to settle this once and for all, Jesus creates trust that expands our vision and opens us up to what God is doing among us.

And this brings us back around to prayer. When we pray to God the Father in the Spirit of Jesus, we are, like John’s disciples, opened up and given a new sense of freedom. There are so many parts of our lives that are focused on outcomes and results and products. Prayer allows us to inhabit a more creative space with God. So that instead of asking *Does prayer work?*, we can ask *How is God working on, in, and through me?* The former only sets us up for frustration and cynicism, the latter creates trust that allows us to be open to God’s work.

One of my favorite images of that openness comes from our friends at Temple Beth Rishon. A few years ago, I was at there for services, and there was a prayer at the beginning of the service that asked God not just to hear our prayers or to accept our prayers but by asking God to be with us on our “prayer adventure.” That’s a great image. And I wasn’t totally surprised when I saw Martin use that same image in his book.

Because when you go on an adventure, you have some idea or expectation of what’s going to happen. But you go into it prepared to be surprised. If you go on a big road trip, you might have some idea where you’re going to spend each night. But during the day, you leave yourself open to surprises. The detour that takes you to a beautiful vista. The pit stop that leads to a new discovery. The lunch break that creates a new connection.

And it’s the same way with prayer. When we pray, we might have some idea of the words we want to say or whom we want to pray for or a joy or concern in our own lives. But in this holy conversation, God opens us up to new experiences, new concerns, new perspectives that we might not be aware of at the outset. That’s what makes prayer an adventure.

Jesus’s invitation to pray with him is the same kind of invitation he gave to John’s disciples. That we can have our expectations and ideas and plans, but we don’t need to be bound by them. We can hold them loosely. And opened up through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can follow Jesus into God’s world with expectant delight.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG