

John is not sure.

Like so many of the rest of us, he wonders about Jesus, about God, maybe even, if he's daring enough, about the certainty of his own assumptions.

John's faith is strong enough that he can risk asking pointed questions.

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

"Should I believe in you?"

Jesus does not look entirely like the one he's waiting, hoping, preaching, praying for.

He only sort of fits the messianic profile, like a jacket that's just a size or two off.

He is gathering crowds and turning hearts, but he's a little too short on judgment and fire, a little too long on healing and compassion.

John has been exhorting people to *prepare the way of the Lord*, to clear a highway for God to come storming through.

But Jesus is not so much General Sherman as Florence Nightingale, bringing justice with a gentle touch, restoration rather than wrath, and on a scale that is at least two sizes too small.

Rather than charging in a chariot, he is walking slowly through sickbay.

It is not exactly the way that John has been working so hard to clear, to prepare, and now John sits in prison for his preaching with too much time to wonder, with no escape from his questions, no distractions from his doubts.

Like so many people of faith across the years and around the room, John is just not sure.

Isaiah preaches to such a crowd.

He rhapsodizes about a glorious homecoming parade to people who aren't sure they want to go.

His hearers have been in exile in Babylon for almost half a century.

His clarion call to return to Zion sounds like the sweet nostalgic nonsense of an old man inviting us all back to the innocence of the nineteen fifties.

Even if you could go back, would you want to?

With Cold War bomb threats and repression and racism in full flourish, was it really as wonderful as selective memories romanticize it to be?

Even if those were *Happy Days*, the best times of your life, you can't go home again.

When you try, the house is smaller and dingier than you remember.

The yard is overgrown with change and neglect and new plantings and patio furniture that weren't there before.

Beloved treasures have been discarded or changed, while some things that needed to change haven't.

Our popular, romantic, home-for-the-holidays Christmas notions range from confusing to cruel for those who do not have happy homes.

Some of us dread going home for the holidays, knowing only too well the pain and dysfunction that loom there.

Others of us are homeless and have nowhere to go, awful or otherwise.

The heart's natural longing for home is countered by the head's knowledge that home is not all we dream it is or want it to be, if it exists at all.

For Isaiah's congregation, home is a distant memory or a rumored history never experienced.
Zion is a place faraway and overgrown with weeds and neglect, its infrastructure in rubble, its economy threadbare, its future bleak.

Why leave Babylon to return to a ghost town?

Why move back now to a childhood home in lower New Orleans or downtown Detroit?
What's left there to go back to, and is there anything there to go forward to?

Is home just a sweet memory or a pipe dream, and does the prophet speak with the authority of God or the delusion of denial?

Is it worth going home for Christmas or not?

The ransomed of the Lord are just not sure.

Advent is a season of expectation, and expectation is a dangerous drug.

It can heal us, and it can also set us up for a hangover of bitter disappointment.

John sits in a prison cell, the savory taste of righteousness and divine judgment still teasing his locust and honey palate, and twists his face at the odd, too-sweet taste of Jesus.

Isaiah markets hope to a skeptical audience, trying to sell the return to Zion like a cruise to a tropical time share too good to be true, but Mapquest says you have to go through the ghetto to get there.

You can't count on the desert to blossom, the jackals to be hospitable, the springs to flow or the fools to find their way...and even if you make it there, is there really worth making it to?

Is the joyful magic of Christmas real, or is it just a widespread fantasy, an artificial feel-good high that will lead only to a nasty headache when it's all over?

Peace on earth, goodwill to all--the rhetoric is nice but so often it breaks down in the headlines and in the checkout lines.

What does real, reliable hope look like, and what if it looks different than we have imagined or researched or remembered or dreamed it to be?

What if what we are longing for looks strikingly different than we conceived it to be?

We would be in exile with Israel, in prison with John.

We would be just not sure.

Try on the jacket anyway.

Take the trip home.

Dare to imbibe the dangerous hope.

Isaiah missed some of the details, but he was right enough.

The ransomed of the Lord did return, which is why John baptized not in the mighty Tigris or the Euphrates but in the humble Jordan, the dingy little holy waters of home.

John also missed some of the details, but he was right enough.

His focus on human effort to blast open a highway for God was misguided, but he did prepare the way for Jesus, who is the way, the open two-way thoroughfare between heaven and here.

Jesus is a bumpy road, but he does connect us, and he is also the good news that God is willing to make the difficult and dubious trip to reach us.

He does not fit our expectations, yet he is still the shape of our hope.

He comes more like gentleness than judgment, more like fresh air than fire.

He comes less like rattlesnake venom and more like a healing kiss that somehow stings more.

He comes not as greenhouse poinsettia but as a tenuous desert blossom.

We expect power and get a makeshift cradle; we expect a Christ and get a cross.

We expect a total violent victory and get piecemeal peace.

We expect happiness in material abundance and get joy in giving it away.

We yearn for home and get a Messiah with nowhere to lay his head; we strain for a wonderful life and find it in the midst of death, in the resurrection of a crucified criminal like a candle in the dead of winter, like a crocus in the heart of the desert.

God sidesteps, frustrates, even mocks our expectations with breathtaking surprise: holiness in the mundane, salvation in a broken morsel of bread, home in a questionable community, beauty in the middle of nowhere, hope in one who is coming about whom neither John nor we can really be sure.

Prepare to be caught off guard.

Prepare to question and wonder.

Prepare to be surprised with strange looking peace and unpredictable joy.

Prepare to be completely unprepared for what is really coming.

Prepare the way of the Lord.