How are you doing with the busyness of this season? I’m thinking that half of you were here for several hours yesterday, working and worshipping and welcoming many guests to St. Paul’s for John Rohde’s ordination. Most of you have been preparing and doing the work of this blessed community for days and months and years. You might feel tired and a little overwhelmed as we approach this last week before Christmas.

The good news is that God is inviting us into a time of preparation that involves doing less, not more. The good news is that Jesus is encouraging us to make space in our hearts and minds for God and by putting our plans and expectations aside. This message is the underlying theme for our passage from chapter 11.

In today’s passage we witness a dialogue about what it means to be part of God’s blessed community. Today we are listening to a conversation between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. This dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist began back in chapter 3, in the passage we heard last Sunday: In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”...John wore clothing of camel’s hair, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John is a strong character and he has some strong words for the people and especially for the religious leaders: Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor.’ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

John prepares the people for the coming of the messiah: I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. John’s words are words of warning. The people must repent or be destroyed.

In the next chapter Jesus comes to John and is baptized. Then Jesus is driven into the wilderness for 40 days and nights and we don’t hear much of anything about John the Baptist for many chapters. When Jesus returns from the wilderness he went throughout Galilee, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness from among the people.

Great crowds of people begin to follow Jesus. In chapters five, six and seven he preaches to them. It’s called the Sermon on the Mount. I’m guessing those who heard John the Baptist might have been expecting Jesus to give a stern message of warning; something to the effect of ‘repent or I will destroy you’. But Jesus doesn’t say that. Instead Jesus gives a most unexpected message: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Jesus delivers a message of blessing and comfort for those who are hungry, and grieving, and exhausted.

Imagine the surprise of those who had heard the preaching of John the Baptist. “Where is the part about the winnowing fork? Where is the bonfire of dead branches? Where is the harsh judgment for all the deplorable folk?”

John told them to repent and return to the Lord. Imagine their surprise when Jesus says, when you are offering your gift to God..stop and leave the altar and first be reconciled with your brother or sister. Imagine their surprise when Jesus says, You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. Imagine their surprise when he says, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may children of your Father in heaven. John the Baptist preached a message of judgment and repentance. Jesus preaches a different message; a message of reconciliation and love.
Jesus proceeds to travel through the cities and the countryside, healing and teaching. He pays particular attention to those who have been marginalized. He heals a leper and the servant of a Roman officer. He heals Peter’s mother-in-law and a bunch of people considered to be possessed by demons. Jesus eats supper with a group of tax collectors and notorious sinners. Jesus listens to their stories and responds with grace and compassion.

Then the disciples of John the Baptist begin to question Jesus. John and his disciples are suspicious of Jesus’ teaching and they are surprised by Jesus’ behavior and the behavior of his disciples. In chapter nine John’s disciples say, *We, disciples of John, and the religious leaders of our community adhere to strict standards of fasting in order to discipline body and spirit. Why don’t you and your disciples fast?* John and his disciples were surprised. They thought Jesus would fulfill their expectations of what the Messiah would do and say. At the very least they expected Jesus and his disciples to adhere to the basic rigors of the spiritual life as they understood it.

John’s doubts increase until we get to our passage from chapter 11. *When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”* John the Baptist has become extremely skeptical about whether Jesus is the Messiah.

It’s all about expectations. Jesus does not act the way John expected the Messiah to act. Jesus does not say the sort of the things John expected the Messiah to say. Jesus is not fulfilling John’s own prophetic words about the Messiah.

Back in chapter three John the Baptist said, *one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.* Now John is doubting his own words. John is questioning Jesus’ power. John is judging the Messiah.

Back in chapter three John did not consider himself worthy to baptize Jesus. John warned the people that Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now John is questioning Jesus. Jesus doesn’t seem to be delivering when it comes to fireworks and vivid displays of power.

It’s all about expectations. Jesus and John the Baptist are not enemies, they are cousins. Their mothers spent a lot of time together when they were pregnant. John was the prophet who told of the coming of the Messiah. John and Jesus are close to each other in many ways. Jesus says, *among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.* But John does not fully understand where Jesus is leading us. John seems to know who Jesus is, but he doesn’t know where Jesus is leading us.

There are two messages for us to take from this conflict between Jesus and John. First, you may find yourself in the middle of a similar conflict with someone who is close to you, or perhaps with someone who is supposed to be close to you. We sometimes hear ourselves or others begin to play the guessing game, the second guessing game. When you notice the strong questions or the tone of judgment coming into the conversation, stop and take a minute to think about the expectations that are being brought into the room.

Second, Jesus encourages us to make space in our hearts and minds by setting aside our expectations. This will not be easy. Sometimes it feels like our plans for making things right are all we have left. But when we set aside some of those expectations, some of our plans for how we will make things right, we make a little space in ourselves for what Jesus brings. Jesus’ actions and words are all about compassion. Jesus encourages us to move into a place of acceptance of others and acceptance of ourselves.

We have been working, preparing, trying to be ready for a new birth of God’s love in our lives. We have been discouraged at times, feeling the weight of judgment from others or from ourselves. Make space in your life for what Jesus brings. Let go of expectations of yourself and others, making space for one hope, the hope of God’s love.