The Lord be with you. It is a joy to be worshipping with you all on this day of days.

You have been expecting this day to come; anticipating, planning, envisioning in your mind what it could look like –what you hoped it would look like. In a real sort of way this chapter of your life—called college—has been bookended by expectations. Four years ago—maybe 5 for some of you—you stepped onto Hope’s campus and as you walked through the Pine Grove, you internally rehearsed your expectations, expectations such as a cadre of new friends and a thriving social network, the realization of what you had been told over and over, that college years are the best years of your life; a new freedom, increased responsibilities, and maybe the expectation that—at the conclusion of this life chapter—you may have found your future husband or wife. And whether you realized it or not, part of what you packed when you left home—along with the TV, microwave, refrigerator, printer, loft bed, futon, Frisbee & Xbox—were these expectations of a new adventure. Parents you, too, had expectations when your student began at Hope: for her dreams to be affirmed or re-directed, for him to leave Hope with a sense of direction, expecting your student to have a clearer picture of God’s call upon their life and their place in the world.

And as you watch your student cross the platform this afternoon, you press the refresh button on those expectations and acknowledge new expectations: to find a job she is a passionate about, to discover an environment that will challenge and convict him, possibly expecting your student to
settle in a geographical area that meets your satisfaction. Students, what are you expecting today? And in what or in whom are those expectations rooted?

This morning we find ourselves within earshot of John the Baptist’s wrestling with expectations. Expectations of Jesus Christ, the Coming One. We might say that John’s life is bookended by expectations. At the onset of his ministry, this scruffy, camel-hair wearing prophet—the forerunner and second-cousin of Jesus—draws the crowds with his bold proclamation: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And the last we hear of John, he has been arrested and is in Herod’s prison; pondering this question and then sending emissaries to Jesus to inquire: Is Jesus truly the One, or should we expect another? Can it really be that the one sent to prepare the way for the Christ got to a point so desperate that he began to doubt the identity of Jesus? As we prepare to listen to the Word of the Lord, will you pray with me? Matthew 3:1-12; 11:2-11.

Perhaps John’s question is one we’ve all asked: Jesus, are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else? Every one of us have experienced a time in our lives when expectations did not line up with reality. One of those moments for me is the day Shane and I received the news that we were going to have twins. Watching the fleshy pink color drain from his stunned face Shane said “College. They give grants for twins, don’t they?” (And before I get on a plane this afternoon, I intend to discuss this with the financial aid office!) Or on a field trip with my twins recently—on the bus ride to our destination—little Ally, sitting across from me says “Mrs. Ver Steeg, let me teach you something that people did in the old days!” “Sure,” I said, “teach me.” She proceeded to do this [recites song/rhyme]. I said “Ally, I know this! I did this with my friends when I was your age,” to which Ally replied, “yes, in the old days.” Not what I expected.
What do you expect? Who do you expect? Are you the One, Jesus, or should we expect another? We first meet John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judea because Matthew wants us to know that the wilderness—the wastelands of the fallen world—is the location where God will build his highway to salvation. Undoubtedly the good news of Jesus has to make its start here, a voice of one crying out: prepare the way of the Lord. For the wilderness is that place where God meets with people: a burning bush, some holy ground and a man named Moses; a maid servant named Hagar kicked out of her home and left for dead in the wilderness says of God, you are the God who sees me; a nation called Israel, homeless and hungry in the wilderness hears God speak, I am your God and you are my people; and in the wilderness, seeming to come out of nowhere but fresh from communion with the living God, John the Baptist puts people in the very presence of God which is what everybody wants and nobody wants. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. In Jesus Christ, God is about to do a big world event, for the kingdom of heaven is a cosmic thing and not just a heart thing. And this rugged, locust-eating John the Baptist knows—as Frederick Dale Bruner puts it—that he is the “next-to-last man.” He knows that his is not the last Word, that one comes behind him whose sandals he is unworthy to untie.

Don’t you wonder—that on that day by the Jordan River—Jesus was a bit baffling or a little strange to John? John is baptizing sinners, immersing them in the abyss of the Jordan, when he looks up and sees Jesus standing in the “to be baptized line.” Standing among the evil-doers, the liars, the cheats, the adulterers, the murderers, the sinners is Jesus, he who is without sin. You’re in line to be baptized by me?, John asks, I must be baptized by you! This is not what I expected! Jesus is less messianic than John had expected and less earth-shattering than he had preached.
Fast forward with me. John the Baptist is in prison. It was to be eight months, but the eight months turned into twelve, and the twelve months into fifteen and the fifteen into eighteen. John will remain in prison until his execution, there remain structural problems in Israel, Pharisees control the religious life, Herod is still on the throne, and Jesus shows no sign of taking the situation by force. Has there been a mistake? John himself is suffering the loneliness, the abuse, the neglect of a prison cell, and now grows doubtful about Jesus. Was my grand announcement about the approaching kingdom of heaven wrong? Did I miss a memo? Can someone who gives time and attention to the dead, the poor, the outcast, the violator of the law, and the diseased be God’s Messiah?

John the Baptist who had identified Jesus as the one who is coming, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire -now sends his disciples to ask him Are you really the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else? Why the doubt, John? In his mother’s womb John knew that Jesus was the one. John knew that he was unworthy to untie his shoes. Had Jesus not lived up to John’s expectations of a Messiah? John knows his Bible, he knows what to look for in a Messiah, what to expect, right? He knows the prophetic promises about fire coming against Israel, and to any nation that will not listen, God will uproot and destroy. John is looking and listening but he’s not seeing fire and he hears no uprooting; Jesus holds no ax to chop down unfruitful trees and no shovel to sift the chaff in his granary. We’ll know the Messiah when we see him and this sure ain’t him! Are you really the One, Jesus? What does Jesus say?

Go back and tell John that evil is defeated, the oppressed are no more, the poor receive a living wage; go and tell John I will free him from prison, the terror is over, the occupation has ended, the homeless are housed, and the scales of justice are restored. No, Go back and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed are those who do not take offense on account of me. It is hard to be the coming One without disappointing people. I think Jesus saves these spot-on words for John and for all of us who are tempted to wonder if Jesus really is the One. Jesus says, And God bless you, John, if you do not throw the whole thing over because I am a different kind of Messiah than what you were expecting.

Hope College family, what are the things you are hearing and seeing? If we say that Jesus is the Messiah, then we are saying that in the ministry of Jesus we are seeing and hearing what God is doing in the world. Jesus is the redeeming way God works. Did you catch Jesus’ candor in Matthew’s gospel? What did you go out into the desert to look at? Some weak thing like a reed tossed around by the wind? Jesus says that John is more than a prophet. If John is more than a prophet, then Jesus is more than more-than-a-prophet. Jesus stands in the place of God. And if the first Advent of Jesus reveals anything, it points to the truth that the presence of Christ is always surprising: shattering agendas and overturning expectations. A human child into the world instead of a great warrior. Sending servants rather than troops. Setting unlikely precedents on hillsides, you had heard it said to hate your enemies, but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, spending his days with the marginalized: the have-nots, the children, the lepers, and the women. And sending people like you and me to do the work of the coming One. Friends, this is called expectancy—living in this broken world tethered to a foundation: We believe in Jesus Christ, who came once and who will come again. I love this quote by John Calvin, “We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is ‘of him’. If we seek any
other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity in his conception; if gentleness it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects that he might learn to feel our pain. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessing, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other" *(Institutes, 2.16.19)*

A friend of mine serves as a Sunday School teacher in a church in Southern California. One Sunday she was talking to her seven-year-olds about becoming Christ-followers. She then handed out pencils and slips of paper and invited the children, if they were ready to trust Jesus, to write, "I accept Jesus." Many children did so. But one little boy got the wording muddled. Instead of writing, "I accept Jesus," he wrote "I expect Jesus." That's it.

Expect Jesus. Expect the One who makes good come from bad, whose light overcomes darkness, whose life has resurrected out of death. *Is Jesus the One we are expecting? What have you seen and heard?* Will you pray with me? [closed sermon with prayer]