

19.12.15

**Responsive reading** (from Isaiah 35:1-10)

Leader: The Lord our God will come and save us.

**People: We will let go of our fears.**

Leader: God will strengthen the weak hands  
and make firm the feeble knees.

**People: We will find our strength in the Lord.**

Leader: The redeemed shall walk in the way of the Lord.

**All: *We shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God!***

Matthew 11: 2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you."

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

## SERMON:

This is the third time we've encountered John the Baptist in the last 4 weeks. We first met John as an infant, when he was named and blessed by his father, Zechariah. We imagined together Z. cradling his tiny son in his arms and offering these words: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the most high; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77)

Then last week in the gospel reading we met John on the banks of the Jordan river, wearing clothing made of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey - honey which I'm guessing didn't come in a jar, but which he dug out of bees nests with his bare hands. John who called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers, warning them of the wrath to come. Telling them that he's preparing the way for the one who has the winnowing fork in his hand, who will gather his wheat but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matt 3:7-12, selected).

Our first glimpse of him was as the very beginning of his life, then at his high point, where crowds were coming out to be taught and baptized by him. The zenith of his ministry. Now, this week, John the Baptist is in a new place. He's gone from wilderness to pent-up-ness. From freedom to confinement. From wide-open spaces to the captivity of a cell. We don't actually see John this week, we only hear his questions.

Imagine John there with me.

John who throughout his whole life knew his mission - his was to *'prepare the way of the Lord, prepare the way of the Lord, and all people will see the salvation of our God'*. But that's not his life anymore. No, now, in prison, John, the fiery baptist, is locked up because he honored his vocation of truth-telling, and condemned the marriage of a faithless king.

John, the one who baptized Jesus, who heard the heavenly voice say this is my beloved son. This John, in chains, no longer eating locusts and wild honey, sends others to ask: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' We're with this John this morning, the one who asks hard questions, because when one is imprisoned, the questions change. When you are captive, physically or spiritually, your yearnings change.

*Let's take a moment, in the midst of this busy season, in silence, and breathe into this John, the one sitting in darkness. Breathe in, taking in the gift of the Spirit, this Holy Spirit that fills us with breath and life, no matter where we find ourselves - imprisoned or freely moving through life. This gift of breath is a remembrance of God with us.*

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" is the question at the heart of Advent. It gives voice to our quiet hesitancy even in the midst of anticipation. It allows us to express uncertainty even though our viewpoint is on the other side of Jesus life, death and resurrection. It

provides us with the words to articulate what our hearts, our souls, actually feel at times when we find ourselves chained in challenging places.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” is the question of longing -- longing for what we dearly hope but then wonder if it can truly be. Longing for promises to come true when it seems that the cards are stacked against us. Longing for what was, but at the same time looking forward to what could be.

And what is Jesus’ response to John’s question of longing?

Jesus responds with gentleness. There’s no shaming John’s question, no he simply says -

"Go and tell John what you hear and see". Tell him that "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. Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

John was preparing for the one to come - the one he prophesied would come with a winnowing fork - come with vengeance and power. Jesus is not living out the expectation of John’s Messiah. Jesus tells John’s followers - go, go back to John and tell him your stories. Help John, the imprisoned one, to see in a new way. Your role is to tell him *my* stories. Tell him what your eyes have seen and your ears have heard. Tell him

what only the stories — quiet as they are, scattered as they are, questionable as they are — will reveal.

The stories we know of Jesus' healing seem so bold, obvious, miraculous. But how were they known by those of his time? How did they make sense of their expectation of a Messiah and this man changing the lives of the ordinary folk through God's love?

How about for us, when our expectations of Jesus are not met? When our prayers aren't answered in ways we long for, when the Messiah isn't boldly present in ways we expect?

Last week just over a dozen of us gathered for a worship planning retreat. We took some time to write down where the moments of dryness, the lack of God's presence is felt in our lives - those places where we expect to find God at work, but sense a void. Things like - when I'm overwhelmed by the needs of the world - climate change, refugees; meanness towards each other; isolation; too much busyness; when I feel like I must save the world and have no power to do so. These were named as places of barrenness. I wonder how you might answer that question.

And then we read answers to the prompt - where we sense God's presence in our world. It's important to take the time to hear these answers from one another. For our own stories also give glimpses of when we see the love of Christ at work in our world today. Stories are the way we piece

together fragments to begin to answer this advent question - are you the one. Here's some of what I heard from those gathered around the table last week:

I sense God's presence in the morning sunrise.

When others pray with me.

When I pause long enough to listen to my children, to look at the stick or bug that makes them stop in wonder...

I sense God's presence in meaningful conversation.

Like looking for a wild animal in the woods, we sometimes need to patiently, quietly wait and watch for signs of Christ at work in the world. What do you see, what do you hear? John expected the Messiah to come in a certain way, and what came instead was something entirely different. Jesus told those listening to pay attention to the new life springing up around them. Jesus says look at the new ways of seeing, walking, living in the world.

I read about a recent gathering in Washington, DC. This was the 4th annual meeting of a group made up of a black father and daughter from Tennessee. A white couple from Georgia. A Somali immigrant. Two South Asians — one from Canada, one from Britain, and others. What brings them all together? They are part of Parents for Peace, a nonprofit where nearly everyone is a former extremist or the relative of one. This group

was started by a therapist, because she saw people “who were isolated by their own stories, they were suffering on their own.”<sup>1</sup>

One of group was a former Neo-Nazi, who has moved from a stance of hate to one of love through the hard, hard work done with Arlo Michaelis. Arlo spent 7 years in hate groups as an active organizer, leader, recruiter and street fighter. He said “I recruited white people who were as angry as I was. I wallowed in violence during that time and got beat up as often as I beat anyone else up.” Fortunately, people I claimed to hate, such as a Jewish boss, a lesbian supervisor, and black and Latino co-workers, defied my hostility. They treated me with kindness when I least deserved it, but when I most needed it.” These examples of how human beings should treat each other ultimately helped him leave the movement and now actively work with organizations that promote tolerance, love and peacemaking.<sup>2</sup>

These are the glimpses of Christ at work in our world that I need to hear. The stories around the margins that remind us that bearing witness to Jesus’ call to love are signs of God at work.

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<https://www.npr.org/2019/12/12/787295283/we-were-blindsided-families-of-extremists-form-group-to-fight-hate>

2

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/15/opinions/ex-white-power-compassion-answer-michaelis-opinion/index.html>

So I encourage you - let John's question be your question this week. Ask it together, with those here in church, around your dinner table -- not to answer it, not to solve it, not to tie it all up in a Christmas bow, but to lean in to the waiting, the wanting, and the wonder so as to hear God's answer.

"Are you the one who is coming?"

"You decide," Jesus answered in love.

Sharing time introduction:

Here's an ironic fact: John the Baptist is remembered by the Church as the patron saint of spiritual joy. *Why?*

Perhaps because he understood something about the rough, unpolished side of faith. After all, joy in a prison cell isn't about sentimentality. Or about the suppression of our most painful crises and questions.

Perhaps he understood that joy is what happens when we dare to believe that our Messiah strips away every expectation we cling to, so that we can know God for who God truly is. Maybe John realized that God's work is bigger than the difficult circumstances of his own life, calling him to a larger joy.