

December 11, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Savior God, liberate us from the sins which distort our vision and alter our hearing as we approach your Word today. Let us not manipulate your Word to receive the message we desire. But, standing firm in your love, let us open ourselves to the truth you lay before us today. Amen.

A reading from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verses 2 through 11. Listen now for the word of the lord.

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” ⁷ 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? ⁸ What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ 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.’” ¹¹ “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.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Last week we were introduced to John the Baptist. This wild prophet who lives in the wilderness. Who eats locust and wild honey. Who wears camel hair. Who preaches a gospel of judgement and repentance as preparation for the one who is to come. A message so powerful that people from the city flock out into the wilderness to hear this message.

Today, our scripture jumps ahead to later in John’s life. Much has happened in this time in John’s life that we skipped over. Jesus has come! The one who John preached would come has arrived. And Jesus himself came to John in the wilderness at the river Jordan to be baptized by him.

That which John the Baptist has destined to do, he has done. What happens after you’ve done what God has called you to do?

Jesus has now begun his ministry, leaving John the Baptist in a unique position – in new territory. No other prophet has seen his prophecy come to life right before him in such a positive, powerful way.

The great prophets of the Old Testament – Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah – none got to where John the Baptist has.

Moses did not make it to the promise land.

Jeremiah and Isaiah did see their prophecy unfold before their eyes – they preached that Israel would fall if the people would only repent, but the people did not listen.

The people did not flock all the way from the city to the wilderness to hear their words. It is only in hindsight, when it was too late, that the people see Jeremiah and Isaiah were right.

But John is different. His prophecy was fulfilled right before his eyes, and now he gets to see what that whom he said was going to come. He gets to see what Jesus the Messiah will do with this world that John prepared for him.

But this leaves John's identity in question, in limbo. Where does he fit in now? His identity is inexplicably linked to Christ, but now the one that testifies to who Christ is, is Christ himself.

And now John is just one among many who witness his works. And where does this lead John? It leads him to prison.

Herod, the puppet King placed by Rome and under Rome's control – imprisons John and John is left there to sit and wonder, how did he get here?

He did everything right. He fulfilled his destiny. The Messiah has come. Then why is he in prison?

It surely should be the reverse. The powerful should be brought down from their throne – it should be Herod in John's place. That was the messiah John was hoping for. That they all were hoping for.

In the first century, prison was a place of agonizing waiting. People were kept in prison while they waited for their trials. And the results of their trials were only three options – they were exonerated, they were exiled, or they were executed.

From the radical nature of John's ministry, I think he knows he will not be exonerated. I think he knows the grim reality of his future – that he will be executed.

And so, he sits in this place of transition. This liminal space of the already but not yet – already captured, but not yet tried – and he doubts.

It's easy to chastise John and appalled at his doubt. For surely the one whose entire ministry was preparing the way for Jesus would not doubt that Jesus was the one he was preparing for.

But when we're faced with the reality that our ministry that we faithfully followed leads us to death – doubt is surely a true response.

I find a lot of comfort in John's doubt. It must be okay to doubt, normal to doubt if Jesus really is the one, if he really is the Messiah, because we look around and still see a world that needs redemption.

Violence and oppression abound around us, and we ask – where is Christ?

John doubts – but Christ's answers. Again, we take comfort – Christ will meet us in our doubt. And the answer Jesus gives John is the same answer we're given when we doubt.

We know Christ is the Messiah not by trusting who he says he is – but by seeing what he has done. He has brought healing and liberation to those who need it most.

And even the smallest glimpses of the Messiah's healing in this violent world are windows where the Kingdom of Heaven breaks through.

But this was not the Messiah that was expected. Not even the messiah John expected.

The Old Testament prophesies a Messiah that will come – but it does not say that the Messiah will cure the sick – give the blind their sight – he deaf their hearing. Jesus' Messiahship breaks the mold that they were expecting.

Just as John preached a blunt and daring gospel of Judgement and repentance, where the chaff will be separated from the wheat – the trees cut down at their root – the people, John included, probably thought Christ would do the same.

But instead, Christ's ministry begins with healing and restoration. Both individually and socially.

In John, we learn a humble lesson. Christ is never the one whom we expect. Even when the one who prepared the way was unexpected himself.

Jesus testifies of John's greatness to the crowd gathered there at the wilderness. He questions them – who did you come here to see? A reed shaken by the wind?

This is likely a not-so-subtle reference to Herod – the coins Herod minted during his rule pictured reeds.

Jesus is contrasting John to Herod. Did you come to see a corrupt king so easily swayed and manipulated by the powers of Rome, whose soft robes show abuse of his own power by the unnecessary extravagance of his court?

No! You came to see a prophet who is greater than all prophets. No mortal is greater than him.

The third Sunday in Advent represents joy. This feels like a strange passage to rejoice in. But maybe the unexpected nature of the passage alone is enough to bring joy.

It's our expectations, I think, that separate us the most from Christ. Even when we're faithful to our calling. Even when Christ calls us the greatest among mortals. Even when our faithful ministry lands us in prison, this does not mean Christ will fit in the nice molds we have prepared for him.

In that, we can rejoice. It's our fragile hold upon the world that brings so much pain.

Thus, it is only one whom works outside the limits of our imagination that can transform the world around us.

John the Baptist is featured so much in Advent because John the Baptist is Advent. He embodies the advent of a new age while living in the old age – he is the bridge between the two. The already and not yet.

He was faithful to his calling. The greatest among prophets and mortals. Yet in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus tells us he is the least. This too, is unexpected Joy.

For this is not a punishment, but a testament to a vast expanse and glory of the reign of heaven.

And as that reign of heaven gets closer and closer John's calling is complete. He still belongs.

As William Herzog writes - perhaps this says that “just when you think you have measured the magnitude of this advent of heaven's reign – you discover that you have not begun to capture the dimensions and magnitude of this advent.”

And to just belong in this reign is joy.

We have much to learn from John – from his time in the wilderness to the prison where he will unjustly meet his end. In every place he finds himself – every step of his journey, even when he doubts – he is still the Advent we turn to year after year. And this advent brings the messiah defies our every expectation.

And in that we rejoice.

Thanks be to God.