



Are You the One?

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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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, those with a skin disease 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 offense 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.

I once attended an Eastern Orthodox service with my husband's Aunt Hella. The iconostasis was quite beautiful. Of course I didn't really understand the icons. But now I have discovered that their purpose is to tell the story of Christ and to draw us closer to him. Just in case you don't know what an iconostasis is, it is a large screen filled with icons in an Eastern Orthodox Church that separates the sanctuary (chancel) from the nave. It includes a special row of icons dedicated to Christ as the one who saved humanity and now rules the earth from on high. In the middle is an icon of Jesus. To his right is an icon of Mary, his mother. To his left is an icon of John the Baptist. Both Mary and John lean toward Jesus, as though their whole existence is bound up with his.

Our lesson opens with John the Baptist. He has been arrested as a political enemy of Herod Antipas. He hears what Jesus has been doing, but wonders if *he is he the One? Or if they are to wait for another.*

Prison can put doubts into anybody's heart, and this is true for John. It's easy to believe in God in the bright sunlight when all is joyful and free, but let the iron doors of difficulty slam shut, and clouds of doubt come rolling in. John has faith in the promise that Jesus has proclaimed, but he doesn't seem to fit the mold of John's expectations. Jesus may have the vision, but he doesn't seem to have the power to overthrow the Roman government. Herod Antipas is trying to make an example out of John. Herod treats John as though he is the no-good chaff that will be burned with unquenchable fire, while his own power grows and flourishes. Instead of this evil tyrant trembling in terror before the flames of judgment, Herod holds the keys to John's cell. Herod should have burned to a crisp and John's cell door unlocked by now. Instead, he remains under arrest. Where is the winnowing fork? Where is the blazing fire? And so, John is left with doubts about Jesus.

We, too, can have moments of doubt. Sometimes we think God isn't meeting our expectations when we endure chronic pain, the loss of a loved one, face career setbacks, see evil triumph, or suffering persist in our world. There are times when we feel distant from God, unable to hear him, or struggle to find meaning in prayer. We can think is Jesus really the One. What evidence do we see? What evidence is there that Jesus is for real? The best path at this point may be that of reflecting on our life experiences. Where have we found God active in our lives? When have we heard witnesses to us how God has been active in their lives?

Today we are invited to examine our own expectations of God. Like John, we may look for dramatic displays of power, yet Jesus comes quietly, compassionately, transforming lives one broken soul at a time. He calls us to recognize Him in the subtle graces that fill our days—in healing, reconciliation, generosity, and renewed hope.

Though John's been told what Jesus has been doing, he isn't satisfied. I think that can be true for a lot of us. So, I ask you, Does Jesus come to meet our expectations? Or does Jesus come to meet our needs?

John sends some of his disciples, to ask Jesus if he is the One. Jesus responds to them saying, *"Go tell John what you have heard and seen." The blind receives 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.* As Jesus speaks to the crowds, he wonders about their expectations. Do they think he is a reed shaken by the wind? Who did they expect to see? Do they expect a fiery prophet?

Jesus reminds them of the prophet Isaiah's words: *"I am sending you a messenger who is preparing the way."* That person is John the Baptist. John now learns something new. The Messiah didn't come to bring final judgment and torch the chaff. He came to heal, to renew, to restore, to give hope. John didn't mistake the *identity* of the Messiah. He mistook the *mission* of the Messiah. God still holds the power of judgment, but that time has not yet come. Jesus the Messiah doesn't blast open the doors of John's prison and bring him freedom, even though Isaiah seems to promise liberty. Instead, God works through Jesus from the bottom up, opening eyes and ears, ending the isolation of disease, and strengthening legs.

What do we make of Jesus' answer? We believe with the benefit of hindsight, considering the resurrection, that Jesus did indeed come as the Messiah. We might nevertheless wonder something like John, why does the world seem so unfair? Why do good people not receive their reward and evil people their judgment? We might even wonder why God doesn't just put a stop to cruelty, crime and terrorism. Why doesn't God end abuse? Why doesn't God silence the skeptics and those who taunt the faithful?

Even though John has trouble believing in Jesus, Jesus had no trouble believing in John. Jesus tells the crowds that although John doesn't live a soft life, wearing robes in a palace, John has character. He makes a remarkable statement about John: "Among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." Jesus ranks John above Abraham, above Moses, above David. Imagine how that statement sounded to Roman ears! Jesus considers the ragged prophet, imprisoned in a cell in a small territory under Roman control, greater than the emperor! Then Jesus ties it altogether. Even if John's courage, conviction, and dedication make him greater than any other person ever born, even the least of those in the kingdom exceed him.

In the kingdom, we will see John's vision fulfilled, where God triumphs over all the evil in creation. In God's kingdom, we will see Isaiah's vision fulfilled, where we will all experience healing and wholeness. Even with all the disappointments and betrayals weighing on our hearts, even with all of those who have destroyed our trust, even when we see the foibles of those we admire and consider heroes, we can place our hope in God's kingdom. Have we dared to risk speaking out to those who oppress and abuse?

We can trust the kingdom with the consequences. Do we see cruelty win too often? We can trust the kingdom. Does an illness or physical limitation bring pain and frustration? We may not find healing now, but we can trust the kingdom. Do we despair that any greatness can exist in us? We can trust the kingdom. Our ministry in the church can lead to frustration. We can see results slip through our hands. We can face someone's anger just for trying to help. We can watch arguments tear at the church. We can endure the church bickering within its walls while horrors go on outside its walls. In all these things, we may wonder why God isn't acting. We may wonder what difference the coming of Jesus makes. We may wonder what

good the church really does. Yet, we also can see God offering strength, peace and comfort through the church. We can experience God building character in us, preparing us for the kingdom.

God does not yet act in the decisive way John hoped, burning up the chaff of evil to purge the creation of sin and sinners. Instead, God brings healing, grace and hope. As we wonder about the suffering of the world, God brings us the faith and shows how God's grace slowly works its way through the creation.

In Jesus' name, amen.