

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 11, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Comfort Straight from the Source

Matthew 11:2–15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.” (vv 2–6)

I.

John the Baptist looms large in Advent. We even started service by singing about him:

When all the world was cursed

By Moses’ condemnation,

Saint John the Baptist came

With words of consolation.

With true forerunner’s zeal

The greater One he named . . .

LSB 346:1

Yes, John the Baptist “with words of consolation . . . with true forerunner’s zeal” . . . well, that *had been* true of John. It *had been* true of John back in his Judean wilderness days. Yes, he *had* preached consoling words to repentant sinners. He *had* baptized them into the Coming One. And, yes, he *had* been zealous—so zealous for the truth that he even called the scribes and Pharisees “a brood and vipers,” so zealous he publicly rebuked ruler Herod for committing adultery with his brother’s wife.

But now, now, for that, John sits in prison, sits in a dark and lonely cell. Now his words of consolation have dried up. Now his zeal has burned out. Now John needs someone to comfort him. Now he needs someone to show zeal on his behalf. And his followers—his disciples—need the same thing. With their leader in prison, where will they go? Whom should they follow now? What will become of John the Baptist and his crew?

You see, doubt looms large. Doubt looms large especially when they hear about all **the deeds of the Christ**, Jesus of Nazareth (v 2). As they hear about the teaching and miracles of Jesus. After all, John had prepared *His* way. John had pointed to *Him* as the Lamb of God. John had declared *Him* to be the promised Messiah, the coming One. He'd done all that, and now look what's become of John—he might as well be chopped liver. That's how it feels. Seemingly forgotten, cast aside. Jesus increases while John gets smaller and smaller and smaller in that small prison cell of his.

In doubt and darkness, when promise and reality don't match, in the struggle to live by faith, where does John turn? Where does he look for comfort? Where does he send his disciples? **He sent word by them and said to Jesus, "Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"** (v 3). Feel free to put an edge on that question. Have a chip on the shoulder when you ask it, or tears streaming down your cheeks. Make it a challenge. Or an accusation. Or a cry for help. Or a fervent plea. **"Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"** Those words can be asked in so many, many ways by John and by men, women, and children in so many different circumstances.

II.

Here we learn two things from John. First, we learn that there's nothing wrong with asking questions of Jesus or even about Him. Second, we learn to take our questions to Jesus. You can be honest with your Lord. But what about trusting Him, you ask? Well, what about it? Honesty and trust aren't opposites. They go together! So trust Jesus like this: not by stuffing down your questions and fears and doubts but by naming them. Bring them to Him. If he couldn't endure your doubts, He would certainly be a very small and petty savior. As if Jesus were to say, "I can deal with the blind and the lame and the dead . . . but what I can't deal with are people who have questions or doubts." How silly! Trust only grows by being exercised and used. So use it by asking. If you want a stronger faith, don't look inside yourself. Don't beat yourself up. Send to Him!

John, of course, isn't the only one who experiences a mismatch between what Scripture promises and the reality of life here and now. He isn't the only one stuck in a dark and lonely prison cell. He isn't the only one whose words of consolation have dried up and whose zeal has burned out. To greater or lesser degrees, we know what it's like. Angry with God and with others because things haven't turned out at all like we expected. Burying our faces in tear-stained pillows because of our suffering or sorrow. Anxious about what the future holds for those who depend on us.

We try to make sense of how things are. We try to make sense of these feelings. We try to remind ourselves of the truth. But it can still seem hollow. Promises, beautiful promises, fill the pages of the Bible. But we don't experience them in full—not yet. The

Messiah has come, but the full Messianic kingdom hasn't. We can't see it, so we struggle to believe. Don't be disheartened by that. Faith doesn't come easy. How does it come? **Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ** (Rom 10:17).

III.

So the disciples of John bring his question to Jesus: **"Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"** They bring their doubt and uncertainty to Jesus. They bring their challenge and cry for help to Jesus. They want to hear it from Him. They know where to go for comfort. They go straight to the source. They want the comfort that Jesus alone can give.

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who isn't offended by Me" (vv 4–6). On the one hand, that doesn't seem like much. Jesus doesn't send them back with a key to the prison or a hidden file. He sends them with a word. He sends them as eyewitnesses of the Word made flesh at work. They bear witness that everything promised by the prophet Isaiah lives in Jesus.

So Jesus, the Word, comes to John through those messengers. As they speak His word, Jesus sneaks by the watchful guards. He passes through the prison bars. He pierces the dark. He comforts lonely John. Just as Isaiah said He would. Jesus **strengthens** John's **weak hands, and makes firm** John's **feeble knees**. He says to John who has an **anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you"** (Isa 35:3–4). Yes, John remains in prison, but Jesus makes it clear by His signs: He will act on John's behalf. If not now, then soon, and if not soon, then now!

Here's the comfort: John hasn't been forgotten. His suffering isn't in vain, nor is it eternal. He won't be left to die and decay forever. Jesus is zealous for John. What He's doing will be to John's benefit. And this zeal will lead Him to an even worse, an ever darker place than John's prison cell. How far will Jesus go to help John the Baptist? He will go to death on the cross. He will suffer the hell of abandonment by His Father. He will lie in the grave.

And what will become of John, of the greatest **among those born of women** (v 11)? No quick fix. Yet he can face the future not just with resignation but with hope and joy. The short-term may look bleak, but the long-term is bright. Because of Jesus, John will live even though he dies. First, he lives by faith through the word. Until, finally, he walks by sight in the life of the world to come. Blessed is the one who is not offended by Jesus!

IV.

As great as John is, however, Jesus also said that **the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he** (v 11). He said that for us. In what way is the least in the kingdom greater than John? Because the messengers sent to us bring an even greater word than the messengers sent to John. They told John about the blind seeing, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead rising, and the poor receiving good news. But we hear even more: Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, has died and risen and ascended and will come again in glory. He has done what He came to do.

“Are You the one who is to come, or shall look for another?” Jesus, the Word, is the One. With words of consolation and zeal He comes to us again and again. He comes by adding His word to water—Holy Baptism—and tells us that it saves. He comes by adding His word to bread and wine—Holy Communion—and promises us that His body and blood gives eternal life. He puts His word in the mouth of the pastor—Holy Absolution—and forgives our sin. Jesus does these miracles again and again for you.

He is our source of comfort. He sneaks by our doubts. He passes through the bars of our questions. He pierces the dark in our hearts and minds. He comforts the lonely—us. **Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you**, too. Jesus makes it clear: He has acted on your behalf, and He acts on your behalf still. Blessed are you, because you are not offended by Jesus.

In following John, even in sharing his doubts and questions, we end up following Jesus. We learn to live by faith—not by an easy faith or by faith in ourselves, but by faith in Him. We learn this not just once but over and again, week after week, in the school of experience. We learn, with John, to suffer by faith. We learn, with John, to hold to the truth by faith, unwilling to bend. Our flesh may not like it. So what? Jesus means death to the sinful flesh, but He will raise our bodies to life whole. Even a fool can’t go astray when he follows Jesus.

So, as St. James encourages, **be patient until the coming of the Lord** (Jas 5:7). Like the prophets, like Job, like John the Baptist, endure through the comfort Christ gives. Because of Jesus, **sorrow and sighing shall flee away** (Isa 35:10). Now, we live by faith. But soon, with John, we will walk by sight. Rejoice!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
