

December 11, 2022

Year A; 3rd Sunday in Advent

Canticle The Song of Mary (Luke 1: 46-55)

James 5: 7-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

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 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."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

On this 3rd Advent, we hear again from the odd and colorful John the Baptist. Last week he was at the Jordan River offering baptism and confronting the self-satisfied and powerful among the crowd, shouting at them and calling them rotten snakes: "You brood of vipers!"

But today we find a subdued John, now arrested, and jailed for confronting the ruler, Herod Antipas. John is in prison on a path to execution, with little chance of ever experiencing freedom again. And the confinement of prison gives John time to think and to wonder and to doubt.

John of course baptized his cousin Jesus, and John has heard of Jesus' actions since that day by the river, and he now wonders of Jesus:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

John's question for Jesus may sound odd to us, as John was the one who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord! John had so clearly spoken in his thundering voice to the people at the river, pointing at Jesus, this is the one, the Messiah, sent from God.

But now, in his dark cell, in the lonely nights, we are reminded that is John is just like us, human and wrestling with doubts.

He is a man who has lived in the wilderness, and spent his days roaming the countryside, traveling and preaching, under the open skies. And now he is chained hands and feet, and his shouts and proclaiming are silenced, and all he can do is think, and wonder, and agonize, and question himself.

So, John sends word to his followers, asking his painful question, asking of the one he had pointed to with such confidence, asking of Jesus:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

What does John's question mean?

John asks his question as he has heard reports of what Jesus has been doing, of Jesus' words and actions, of his preaching, healing, forgiving, offering hope to folks in the darkest nights.

And Jesus is not what John had expected a Messiah to be, what John had even assumed a Messiah would be. John's preaching had told us that he expected a Messiah who would be formidable, who would preach a fierce repentance and speak often of the wrath to come.

John expected the Messiah to be, well, like him.

So, when Jesus spoke more of forgiveness than wrath, more of healing than unquenchable fire, John asked:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

We, of course, do the same thing today with Jesus, that John did in prison. We expect a Savior who is familiar, even predictable, to look like all the rulers and royalty and presidents, anyone powerful we have known, a Savior who will be strong and mighty, the biggest, and the best.

And Jesus comes to us and preaches of humility, of turning the other cheek, of forgiving our enemies, and caring for the poor, the strangers, the orphans, the widows, still startling to us, still not what we expect, still hard to recognize.

And John’s question has a second meaning.

John is in prison, wondering if he has done what he was called to do, to point to the one, the Messiah.

He will not have another chance to point the way; John knows that incurring the wrath of Herod Antipas does not lead to pardon and freedom.

And in that dark prison John wonders and agonizes, has he answered his call, or has he pointed in the wrong direction?

John as radical and strange and grumpy as he was, was of course, just as human as you and me. He needed light and hope and encouragement in that darkness. John yearns to know he has done what was asked of him, that he has done well as his earthly journey is drawing to a close.

And then comes Jesus’s reply, sent with the ones who will travel back to the prison and visit John:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see.”

Jesus will not give a direct answer to John, or to us, but instead invites us to LOOK for where Jesus has been, and to notice what has happened.

We need to notice that his work and light will show, not in words, but in the lives changed; when the prisons are opened, when those who are crippled are healed in body, mind, and spirit, when those who are thought unclean and avoided are invited into the community, when the poor have good news, deeply good news.

So, the Messiah will come not look ANYTHING like our leaders past and present. The Messiah will not look like anyone who holds the spotlight in our world.

The Messiah will not be the loudest, not the strongest or the most feared. But where healing and hope abide, there will be the Messiah, our savior and brother, Jesus.

Instead of a psalm today, we have a Canticle, The Song of Mary, from the Gospel of Luke. In it we hear Mary's voice, telling us too who God is and where we will see our Lord, among the lowly and the hungry.

*He has shown the strength of his arm, **
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, **
and has lifted up the lowly.
*He has filled the hungry with good things, **
and the rich he has sent away empty.

And so, as Christmas Eve draws nearer, we are called as Christians, if we are serious about being Christians, to look for our Savior in the manger, but to look for him too each day, where the poor are fed, where strangers and outcasts are welcomed and treated with kindness. And when we see our Savior among the suffering, we are called to join him there.

Amen.

