

Third Sunday in Advent: Matthew 11:2–15

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John doubted. The greatest born of woman, the one who walked in the prophetic footsteps of Elijah, the prophetic Voice in the wilderness doubted. Who could blame him, really? There was the big build-up. A coming one who was so great John was not worthy to untie his sandals, coming with an axe ready to swing at the root of the faithless and the fruitless. He's coming with a winnowing fork to thresh the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. He's coming with Baptism of not simply water but the fiery wind of the Spirit.

And then Jesus came. Humbly, meekly. He came to John to be baptized by him. He came as a penitent to John's baptism of repentance. The Sinless One came to be treated as a sinner and submit to a cleansing He didn't need. It freaked John out. He was outraged. "I should be baptized by you, and here you are coming to me! You have it backwards, Cousin!" Jesus response to John: "Let it be, John. This is how it goes. This is proper for us to do to fulfill all righteousness."

You can understand John's disillusionment. There he was sitting in Herod's prison. Literally taken out of the game. His crime: criticizing Herod's adulterous affair with his brother's wife Herodias. For that he would eventually lose his head. If John was anything like his contemporaries, he had certain expectations about the Messiah, the Christ, God's coming Anointed One. John was raised in the wilderness, where messianic expectations ran white hot. Everything that John said about Jesus fits the bill. The axe, the winnowing fork, the fiery breath, the judgment. Messiah was supposed to be a strong man, God's appointed warrior, someone who would gather an army, lead a revolution, put Israel back on the map, restore the throne of David and the splendor of Solomon. When the people of Jesus' day heard, "Repent for the kingdom of God is near" they thought "Drop what you're doing, the revolution is near. The kingdom of God is coming to the earth. Get ready to fight! Take up your swords!"

Then Jesus comes and He asks to be baptized by John. And then He goes and preaches the good news of the kingdom to the poor, the marginal, those on the fringes. He heals the sick, raises the paralyzed off their mats, cleanses lepers with a touch, gives sight to the blind,

hearing to the deaf, and raises the dead. And his right hand man, his forerunner, gets tossed in prison for taking on Herod's morals. Maybe John got a bit ahead of himself and decided to go after Herod. Herod was trying to be a messianic contender himself. Maybe John thought it was time to flex some moral muscle in the direction of Herod knowing that Jesus would have his back. And now he's rotting in jail and Jesus is off on another preaching tour. This was hardly the expected messianic agenda.

And so John sends the question out from the dungeon to Jesus in the field. "Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?" It's a hard question coming from a man hardened by the wilderness, a man who had one thing on his mind – the coming kingdom of God. He knew he wasn't going to get out of this prison. He knew there was no one coming to storm the gates to free him. He knew his head would be served up on a platter to Herodias. But he needed to know this one thing from Jesus: Are you the Coming One or do we look for another?

Hear those words of John and tremble. You have not been tested nearly so severely as John. Perhaps people make fun of you going to church on Sunday instead of Sunday brunch. Maybe people make fun of you for believing that the Bible is God's Word or that Baptism saves you or that the bread and wine are Christ's body and blood. Maybe the word "Christian" is spoken with a snarl on the world's lips these days as people begin to realize just how powerless Christians are in this world. But you haven't been imprisoned for your faith. You haven't been persecuted. You haven't been tortured or harassed like the brothers and sisters in Christ we pray for every Sunday. Maybe you've been inconvenienced now and then, but no one is going to cut off your head and deliver it on a silver platter.

John was great. A man specially sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord ahead of Jesus. John had God at his back. And still John doubted when Jesus did not fit his expectations.

Expectations are the source of our disappointments and doubts. When the people around us don't live up to our expectations, real or unreal, we're disappointed. We often let them know it. We no longer have faith in them. They aren't worthy of our trust. They disappointed us. "I'll never trust him or her again," we say. We say that about God too, when He doesn't live up to our expectations, when He doesn't grant us favors on demand to reward our believing, when He leaves the cancer be or when He lets the bullet fly undeflected toward the innocent, when he allows the floods to rise, the winds to blow, the fires to burn, when our lives of seeming sacrifice go unrewarded and unrecognized, whether by others or by God.

Imagine John, the untamed prophet of the wilderness, sitting in Herod's dungeon. Herod would come down to talk to him every day. He was fascinated by John, and he feared him. Can you imagine what must have been going through this wilderness man's mind? He was used to being out in the open, under the open skies, eating locusts and wild honey, and now he's chained in a dungeon awaiting his execution. Where was Jesus? Where was the revolution? When would the Coming One come? Are you the One, or do we look for another?

Jesus responds with the signs. The signs of the coming age are not signs of power and might but of healing and new creation. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the unclean are clean again, the dead rise, the poor hear good news that they are not poor. The signs reveal to faith what the eye cannot see and the ear cannot hear. The kingdom of God has come with the coming of Jesus. The Son of God has come in the flesh, and the age of messiah has dawned. The light shines in the darkness, even as the darkness seems to prevail and have the upper hand. Herod appears to rule the day. He runs the dungeon. He can arrest John and hold him in prison. He can silence the preacher of repentance. But there is a Lion running loose in Herod's kingdom, Judah's Lion, who has come to deal with Sin and Death once and for all by His own dying and rising. And on His way to the cross He is leaving little signposts all over the place, tokens of the coming age. Water becomes wine overflowing. The deaf hear, the lame walk, the blind see, the dead rise. These are all signs of the messianic day having dawned. The Lord has come.

"Go tell John what you hear and see." Jesus sends John's disciples back to the dungeon with the signs. Tell him. Jesus doesn't leave John to die in doubt but sends word into the darkness. The kingdom is here John. Here for you. Everything you'd hoped for and more has come. Trust me, John. "Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me."

Are you the Coming One? Or do we look for another? The question still comes from the prison house of Sin and Death, out of that unholy alliance of the devil, the world, and our old Adam. God is not rising to our expectations. God is not working our agenda on our timetable. But to our doubting minds and hearts, Jesus speaks the signs. His Word of forgiveness. His Baptism. His Body and Blood. His death and resurrection applied to you in your own personal dungeon. He's come to free you. To unbar the gates and break the chains that hold you captive to Sin and Death. Don't be scandalized by His seeming weakness. His strength is perfected in weakness. Don't be scandalized by His slowness. He comes quickly, in an eternal moment for which a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. Don't be scandalized by His

cross, it is your healing. Don't be scandalized by His hidden ways that seem so at odds with the world; His ways are not your ways, His thoughts are not your thoughts.

The kingdom of God in this world suffers violence and violent men lay hold of it. John can be arrested and executed on a whim. Jesus can be arrested and crucified. Violent men may seize the kingdom, but in the end the kingdom lays hold of them. Herod died an ignominious death in exile. Men may judge the kingdom, but in the end, the kingdom judges them. Powerful men may silence the prophets and apostles and even lay hold of the King and crucify Him, but in the end the Word of the Lord endures forever.

In these dark and latter days, you too may doubt and wonder if Jesus is the one. Faith and doubt go together as saint and sinner. Doubt comes with waiting, with unfulfilled expectations, with delayed gratifications, with living in the "now" while waiting for the "not yet." Dead but still dying. Risen in Christ but still awaiting resurrection. Listen to the Word. Take in the signs. Even when you are doubting, especially when you are doubting. Tell John what you see and hear. He waits to hear from you in the darkness. Sin-deafened have forgiveness preached into them. The dead are raised to life in Baptism. The prisoners of Sin are set free and forgiven. The eyes of unbelief are opened. The poor in spirit are rich in the treasures of the kingdom.

"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come to save you." And blessed are you who are not scandalized by this crucified King and His kingdom.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Mt. 11:2-15 / 15 Dec. 2013 (Advent 3)", posted 2013-12-15 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/12/mt-11-2-15-15-december-2013/>).