

Advent 3A (12/11/16)

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Life assails us with unmet expectations, disappointed hopes, sudden bouts of uncertainty. The Savior is not who we expect – or who we might wish – he would be. Doubt, however, is not antithetical to faith. In fact, our most earnest questions point us to the very One for whom we yearn, the incarnate Word of hope who joins us even in our most hopeless darkness, yet who sustains us with good news.

And just like that, we can relate to John. In a matter of only a week, we have a dramatically different portrait of the “one crying out in the wilderness.” Last Sunday, John the Baptizer appeared in the middle of nowhere, calling the people – and especially the “good religious people” – to account for our unfaithfulness. *Snakes!* he called us, not caring who he might offend. *Repent! And let your new life reflect the earnestness of your repentance!* He was rough around the edges – the spitting image of the storied prophet Elijah – and he subsisted on what meager food nature provided. John was indebted to no one except God.¹ So, his baptism of repentance carried with it an air of authenticity, and we were convinced. Then, John demonstrated his own faithfulness by refocusing our attention where it really belonged: *Jesus is coming after me, he insisted, he will make all the difference. He will show you the way of heaven on Earth. Be ready.*

John the Baptizer is a true prophet – “Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet,” Jesus confirms in our Gospel from Matthew today. **John is no less than**

¹ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 95.

the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who prepares the way for Emmanuel, God-with-us.² John is the opening act to the greatest show on Earth.

So, what's with the backpedaling in today's Gospel? To be fair, it's only been a week for us since the scene at the river Jordan, so John's courage of conviction is fresh in our minds. But for John, perhaps several months have passed, and as we might have predicted, he's made his way into the crosshairs of powerful people. So, his question today emerges from the darkness of a prison cell: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" **Captivity has a way of dampening the spirit, and John's faith is shaken. Tell me, he pleads, was I right about you the first time, or not?**

John was so confident, so in command last week; how can he have lost that zeal so quickly? This question has troubled theologians since the dawn of the faith, and many have gone so far as to reject John's apparent uncertainty. No, he is not suffering a crisis of faith, they argue; he is simply giving Jesus an opportunity to make an unequivocal public declaration of his identity for the sake of others, perhaps especially for the sake of John's own disciples.³ In other words, this is yet another instance of John's eagerness to point people to Jesus.

I don't buy it. We don't need an immovable hero in John the Baptizer. We don't need him to be perfect all the time. **What we need is an authentic example of faith, one that takes into account the reality of suffering and doubt.** We need the one with the most confidence to also voice the most honest question: "Are you

² Matthew 1:23.

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, 174.

the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John’s circumstances lead him to question whether Jesus really is a source of salvation. Is he really “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”?⁴ After all, Jesus hasn’t removed King Herod’s sin,⁵ or the sin of the Roman imperial occupiers, or any number of other sins of persecution or repression. John’s prison cell is hard proof of that.

Unmet expectations make space for doubt. And, don’t we all know what it’s like to have our sense of security suddenly dissolve in a moment of misfortune? Don’t we know what it’s like to have our hopes come crashing down around us and leave us with nothing but skepticism? No matter the strength of our conviction, we are liable to find ourselves imprisoned with John from time to time. *This wasn’t how it was supposed to be*, we lament, and wonder if there’s any reason for faith after all.

[David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, 50-1].

Life assails us with unmet expectations, disappointed hopes, sudden bouts of uncertainty. When life does not go the way it was supposed to, we may struggle to find blessing in the pain. The Savior is not who we expect – or who we might wish – he would be. And, no easy platitudes can adequately address the doubt that rises to the surface: *Are you the one who is to come, God, or not?* Although we are conditioned to fear and love God, there also has to be room in our relationship with the divine for this kind of question. And John the Baptizer, none other than the forerunner of Christ himself, gives us permission to ask it.

⁴ John 1:29.

⁵ Mark E. Yurs, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 71.

Dear church, doubt is not antithetical to faith. In fact, our most earnest questions point us to the very One for whom we yearn, the One who invites us to look again and see his flickering light even in our most hopeless darkness.⁶ This is God's incarnate Word of hope, the flesh-and-blood sign of God's presence with us. This is the One who joins us in our poverty and imprisonment – and even on our crosses – yet who sustains us with good news: *This is not how it was supposed to be, but it's not all there is.*

So, even when things fall apart, even when you are forced to let go of your expectations, cling to the hope that God knows your deepest disappointments and your fiercest hopes. And God is able to bring dawn from darkness, peace from pain, life from death.

⁶ John 1:5.