

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 11, 2022

Advent Questions

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

The Lectionary's Old Testament Lesson on the First Sunday of Advent would have taken us to the mountain of the Lord's house—the temple, to which all the nations would go to learn God's ways. On the Second Sunday we considered with Isaiah a stump—the stump of Jesse, from which would grow a righteous ruler. Today we go with the prophet to a wilderness, a desert which will rejoice and blossom; there we will see streams in the desert. In this Lesson Isaiah celebrates not only the transformation of the wilderness into a fertile land, but also the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the dumb; and finally the restoration of Zion. Listen to these words from Isaiah 35:1-10 . . .

Introduction to Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson today is from the first of the four Gospels. John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way of the Lord, is now in prison, a far different setting from the Gospel Lesson last Sunday, when we heard him boldly preparing the way for Jesus. John has heard about what Jesus is doing, and is not doing, and he is troubled. So he sends disciples to Jesus to ask a question, because Jesus, it turns out, is not the kind of Messiah that John expected. Listen to these words from Matthew 11:2-11...

Sermon

At this point in Advent certain questions arise. Mothers and Fathers are wondering if they will have enough to go around. Will there be enough love and affection to feed every dear heart,

and will there be a little for me? Some are asking what they should give; others are pondering what they may get. Still others of us wonder how many more Christmases we have left.

Primitive folk asked questions this time of year also. Ever since the June equinox, the days had been getting a little shorter, and the nights a little longer. Fall was one thing with its crisp cool air, but December nights were something different. And sometimes the ancients wondered if this year perhaps the sun would just keep on going, farther and farther down, and before long be gone forever. The warmth they depended on, the light needed for life itself, could be gone forever. And so the people would light fires at night as if to say, “O sun, please come back. Please come back and make the world warm again.” And their question was answered around December 21st (on our calendar), when it seemed to the observant eye that the sun paused in its downward journey, and the following days grew a bit longer, day by day.

And the question we will consider this morning is that question asked by John the Baptist from his prison cell, “Are you the one who is to come, or we to wait for another?” (Mt. 2:3)

Yes, John the Baptist was in prison. The eagle was caged. This same one who had been a voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” this one who was to herald the coming of the King, this one who was the first to recognize the adult Jesus as the Messiah promised by God, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (Jn.1:29) This same one now appears to have doubts, second thoughts. “Are you he who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” And his doubt grew out of questions regarding the nature of the ministry of Jesus.

The career of John had ended badly. It was not his habit to soften the truth for any man; and John was incapable of seeing evil without rebuking it. Herod Antipas of Galilee had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit, he seduced his brother’s wife. He came home again, and dismissed his own wife, and married the sister-in-law whom he had lured away from her husband. Publicly and sternly John rebuked Herod. But it was never safe to rebuke an

eastern despot. Herod took his revenge, and John was thrown into the dungeons of the Black Fortress of Machaerus (mah kee' ruhs), located in the mountains near the Dead Sea.

For any man that would have been a terrible fate, but for John the Baptist it was worse. For John was a child of the desert; all his life he had lived in the wide open spaces, with the clean wind on his face and the spacious vault of the sky for his roof. And now he is confined within the four narrow walls of an underground prison.

In Scotland there is an old fortress called Carlisle Castle. And in the castle there is a little cell. Once long ago they had put a border chieftain in that cell and had left him there for years. There is one little window, which was placed too high for a man to look out when he is standing on the floor. On the ledge of the window, in the stone, there are two depressions, the marks of the hands of the border chieftain—the places where, day after day, he had lifted himself up by placing his hands on the ledge so that he might look out on the green dales across which he would never ride again. John's experience must have been like that. So we can understand how questions began to form in his mind, despite having once been so sure that Jesus was the One who was to come.

John was a stern man living in the wilderness, and he spoke of coming retribution, of trees axed at the roots, and a new baptism of fire. He thought that with the arrival of the Christ, the world as he knew it would be transformed before his very eyes. But instead of carrying out the final judgment, Jesus is teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and infirmity. (9:35) In short, Jesus is not the kind of Messiah John expected.

In his answer, Jesus helps make the connection between the things he is saying and doing, and the traditions that formed and undergirded the people of Israel. Jesus harkens back to the healings prophesied by Isaiah, and points to what is going on in his own ministry:

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. (Mt. 11:5)

While some things about a Christ who ate with sinners and associated with publicans were not quite what John and many others had expected, the signs of God's presence, seen in Isaiah's vision, offered a response that could have been recognized. There *is* judgment in Jesus' presence, but his primary activity is restoration of the needy and giving life to the lifeless.

Thus Jesus interprets his present mission as not that of the fiery reformer of the end times, but the embodiment of the divine blessings promised by Isaiah to be shed on the unfortunate of society. He carries no ax or winnowing fan, cleans no end-time threshing floor, and burns no chaff. Instead, he cures, frees, raises up; he cares for the blind, cripples, lepers, deaf, and even the dead; and he preaches God's good news to the poor.

What if we as disciples of Christ saw our mission and ministry to be primarily about sharing, in word and deed, good news with those who may feel like they are "the least of these." Senior citizens at Senior Solutions. Children at Thornwell or Calvary Home who have known too much pain and suffering, all too soon. Homeless children of District 5. Hungry people to whom we can bring a meal, along with caring words. People served by Good Neighbor Cupboard in Anderson. Women seeking to overcome addictions in the Women's Ministry at The Haven of Rest.

"For whatever you do for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me." (Mt. 25:40)

This might be just a curious Advent story—the account of how, long ago, one person—John the Baptist—grappled with the work and person of Christ. But if we see this story and its meaning as wholly in the past, we will miss the way it can speak to us today.

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

This question, in fact, can put our whole lives into focus. If we believe that Jesus is the One that God sent in the fullness of time, then we will see the world and our place in it in a certain way. If, instead, we are looking elsewhere, what we will see is quite different. If we are looking for things that make us feel good, then we can look at the commercials. If it is for someone who promises us happiness and prosperity, then we can look to the success preachers. If it is for power, we can look to political leaders.

But, if we shift our focus within, we may discover a need deeper than all the distractions that surround us. We may realize that it is not just the disabled, the sick, and the poor in the Bible who long for healing and good news. But we, too, yearn to be freed from whatever handicaps and impoverishes our lives.

Perhaps *you* and *I* need to be restored to the joy of God's salvation. *We* may need "The Touch of the Master's Hand." *We* may need God's blessing. For we all have known plenty of suffering in the wilderness. It may be an addictive behavior, it may be the pain of growing up in a family where we were abused or ignored, and living with that pain into adulthood. It may be losing a loved one to death, divorce, or a disease like Alzheimer's. We all have our own inner burdens, our own weaknesses, our own shortcomings.

"It's not my brother, nor my sister,
but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

Therefore, Jesus might say to us, "Maybe I am not doing all the things you expected me to do. But the powers of evil *are* being defeated, lives *are* being changed, people *are* being healed, even as Isaiah said they would."

And finally, note this: The end of Jesus' answer to the question of John the Baptist is a beatitude, a blessing pronounced on the person who does not cling to preconceived ideas about him:

“And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (11:6)

Thereby do we know the heart of the gospel—that Jesus comes not to condemn but to redeem, that he is the embodiment of the blessings for humanity once announced by Isaiah. That he is indeed the Prince of Peace. The Good Shepherd—who will lay down his life for the sheep. (Jn 10:11) The One who will come again to consummate his eternal Kingdom.

“And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (11:6)

And unto him be honor and glory for ever and ever! Amen.