

Matthew 11:2-11

²While John was in prison, he heard about the things Christ was doing. He sent two of his disciples ³to ask him, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?”

⁴Jesus answered them, “Go, report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.”

⁷As these two were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Expectations

I.

Timid? That would not be a word a person would use to describe John the Baptist.

The last two Midweek Advent services have spoken about Zechariah and Elizabeth, John’s parents. John was a child of promise. John came into this world in a very special way. He was born to parents who were too old to have children. The angel speaking to Zechariah about his coming indicated that he would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Last week’s Gospel identified John this way: “Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight’” (Matthew 3:3, EHV). It’s safe to say that Zechariah and Elizabeth had told John all about what the angel Gabriel had said about who John was and what he would do. They taught John well.

Throughout his life John undoubtedly prepared himself to be that forerunner. He learned the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He knew them all. He had read Isaiah and the prophecy about the Root of Jesse that we spoke about last Sunday. Isaiah’s words had looked at Jesus’ first and second comings right together with that prophetic perspective that sees two future events standing side by side. As the last prophet who spoke as the Old Testament prophets spoke, John saw things that way, too.

In last week’s Gospel we learned: “In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, ²“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!”” (Matthew 3:1-2, EHV). Timid? Not at all. Not only did he preach repentance, he called the religious leaders the “offspring of vipers” (Matthew 3:7, EHV). He warned them: “Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10, EHV).

During his ministry John identified Jesus as the Messiah he was preparing people to receive. He was reluctant to baptize Jesus, saying that *he*, John, should be the one being baptized by Jesus. He saw the miraculous sight of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and heard the voice of the Heavenly Father from heaven proclaim about Jesus: “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him” (Matthew 3:17, EHV). John said of Jesus: “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘The one coming after me outranks me because he existed before me’” (John 1:29-30, EHV).

Now John was in prison for his preaching. Some say that John sent his disciples to learn from Jesus what *he* already knew and believed so strongly. Others say John had come to have some doubts, and wondered if he had been wrong about Jesus.

John was human. I wouldn’t be surprised if the doubts were his own, not just those of his followers. John had spent so much time studying Old Testament prophecies. He had preached fire

and brimstone sermons that looked ahead to Judgment Day. Where were the acts of judgment that Isaiah and other prophets pointed to? Why does John look like a failure as he, the one who was supposedly destined to be the forerunner of the Messiah, rots in prison? Was his whole life a failure?

John figured that, at the very least, if he had been right all along and Jesus *was* the Messiah, he ought to get on with it. Jesus ought to *do* the things John had proclaimed he would do. He ought to strike the root of the trees. He ought to cut down the rotten spiritual trees and throw them into the fire.

II.

John was not so unusual. *Everyone* seems to have their own ideas about who the Messiah is—or at least, who he *should* be, in their estimation. Each of us has expectations of who Jesus is and what that means for *me*.

I'm going to do something unusual. I'm going to read word-for-word from the Commentary on the Propers that was produced as a companion for our new hymnal. This is a book that shows how each of the lessons melds together around the theme of the day for each week of the church year. We are in Year A, so if you want a copy, get the year we are in.

In the Messiah's kingdom, things are not always what they seem. Appearances can be deceiving and lead to doubt—especially when our present reality seems out of line with God's promises. Would the Messiah really let his premier prophet rot in chains? Would the Messiah really let wickedness go unpunished? What kind of Messiah are you? Or are you not, in fact, the Messiah at all?

Mankind wants a bespoke (custom made) Messiah. We only differ in how we want him customized. Israel wanted a political-spiritual Messiah whose message of the kingdom would inevitably be followed by a reestablishment of Davidic rule and removal of Roman oppression. The generic Christian of today wants a Messiah who is a good teacher, a philosopher, an inspiration for brotherly love. Faithful Christians face the temptation of a made-to-order Messiah too. We want a Messiah who isn't bothered by the sin that keeps cropping up in our life, a Messiah who doesn't call for total dedication but a more relaxed association with him, a Messiah who answers our prayers and dispenses blessings that ensure our life is blessed, as we would like to define it.

But that's not the Messiah who came.

<https://online.nph.net/christian-worship-commentary-on-the-propers-year-a.html>

For John, what he was experiencing as a prisoner because he preached about Jesus as the Messiah wasn't meeting up with his expectations. When you and I go through things that don't seem to our thinking to line up with God's promises, doubt begins to contend with faith.

Why does Jesus allow persecution of his followers? Why do godless people seem to run everything? Why does it seem as though our country is slipping more and more into godlessness; wouldn't it be better if Christianity were allowed to flourish here as it once seemed to do?

We want a made-to-order Messiah. Each one of us, according to our sinful nature, would like to define Jesus as we wish; we would like pick what we want from the menu and have *him* conform to what we want. All the things we *don't* want from the menu wouldn't be in our own personal version of the Messiah.

III.

Jesus understands doubts. Jesus understands sin. Jesus understands human beings who come for the wrong reasons and are looking for the wrong things.

⁴“Jesus answered them, ‘Go, report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me” (Matthew 11:4-6, EHV).

Jesus pointed to the prophecies John had read and studied as a young man. He pointed to the prophecy from Isaiah—the same one that served as today's First Reading. He told John's followers

to report back with what they heard Jesus preach and what they saw him do.

The miracles are in order of increasing difficulty. Jesus healed people: blind could see, lame could walk, people with skin diseases were cured, deaf people could hear. God said in Leviticus: “Indeed, any man who has a defect shall not approach—a man who is blind or lame, or...” (Leviticus 21:18ff, EHV) and the list went on. In other words, the Ceremonial Law of the Jews excluded people with deformities from participating in temple worship.

Beyond the miracles of healing, there was a far more difficult miracle. Who can raise the dead? Only God. Jesus raised people back to life.

Most vital of all the miracles is that the gospel is preached to the poor. On Reformation Sunday we heard Jeremiah’s prophecy, another that John the Baptist would have known well: “Yes, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31, EHV).

Though John was still looking ahead, the fulfillment of that prophecy was very close. Jesus was the Lamb of God that John had spoken about. He took the sins of all people to the cross and became the sacrifice God required for sin. Jesus made a new covenant to restore our broken relationship with God.

John’s life was not in vain. He *had* prepared people for the coming Savior. Some of John’s disciples became part of Jesus’ 12 disciples. John had pointed them to Jesus.

IV.

“Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11, EHV). John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. He was the end of an era. Now the Savior was here. Now it was time to look ahead. Those who are part of Jesus’ kingdom are going to see things John never saw.

What do we do with what we have seen and heard? Jesus asked about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” (Matthew 11:7, EHV). Had people ventured out into the wilderness to see a man whose message was so weak that it would bend with every popular opinion and sway around by the whims of society? If that was what they had gone to see, they had been disappointed.

“What did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? No, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses” (Matthew 11:8, EHV). Did people go out there to see a spectacle? A man who wore really weird clothing and ate bugs would be quite a sight. I can imagine him being rather disheveled.

“So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you! And he is much more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9, EHV).

Remember how Jesus finished today’s reading? “Whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

It’s time for us to reset our expectations. It’s time for us to live like John the Baptist. No, you don’t have to go get a new wardrobe and eat bugs dipped in honey. That’s a relief, eh? But it’s time to be someone who is more than a person shaken by the wind. Be someone who follows what God says. Be someone who holds firmly to the understanding of what God has said is evil and keep away from it, no matter what winds of society are blowing.

Be someone who is not influenced by the things the social influencers want you to be influenced by. Keep holding firmly to the truths of Law and Gospel. Every person has sinned and deserves hell. Jesus paid for the sins of all. You will go to heaven because you believe in what he has done for you.

Be like John and preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Be like John and point to Jesus, who took away the sins of the world.

Don’t get fooled into false expectations, but keep your expectations grounded in Jesus and all he has done for you. Amen.