

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.”

Are You the Coming One?

I.

There was a young man who was destined to be a pastor. In the pews, even before the age of three, he knew all the liturgy. From the pews, sitting with his parents, he would mimic the pastor—when the pastor turned around, he would turn around; he spoke *all* the parts of the liturgy, both those of the pastor and the people; every hymn and song he knew he sang along. Playing church continued at home. The young man adopted the family piano bench as an altar and conducted worship services for his siblings.

When the time came for confirmation classes, the boy absorbed everything like a sponge. The pastor knew his ability and assigned extra work, since he was the only student in confirmation classes for his first year.

The boy was going to be a pastor. Everyone knew it. Everyone except himself.

The young man seemed to be headed safely in the right direction. He went away to synod prep school for high school. He started pre-seminary college. But his heart wasn't in it, and he quit.

Ok. I was that young man. You have probably figured it out already. While some children know exactly who they are and what they want to achieve in life, others flounder along trying to figure out just who they are. Sometimes what a child will be is evident to everyone except him or herself. It can be a long process.

If there was ever a young man who knew exactly who he was and what he would do in life, it had to be John the Baptist. When his father, Zechariah, learned from the angel that he and his wife were going to be parents in their old age, Zechariah fell into unbelief. As a sign to him, God deprived Zechariah of the ability to speak until the child would be born. Zechariah understands, and names the child “John,” just as the angel had instructed.

John's parents weren't as old as Abraham and Sarah when Isaac was born, but they were at an age where it was clear to everyone they would never have children. The miracle of women past childbearing age was God's way of saying the child born was going to be special. If nothing else, children born to parents later in life gave everyone something to talk about.

John the Baptist had much more to talk about. When Zechariah regained his ability to speak, he sang a song we still use in worship services today, called the Song of Zechariah. His song began: “Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited us and prepared redemption for his people” (Luke 1:68, EHV). As his song went on, Zechariah described how the child born to him and his wife, Elizabeth, would be a prophet of the Most High and would prepare the way for the Messiah, who was soon to come.

We don't know how long Zechariah and Elizabeth lived after John was born, but what *they* didn't tell him about the unusual circumstances of his birth, other friends and relatives surely did. From his childhood he knew that he was to be the one to go before the face of the Lord to prepare his way. He would begin to lead the people out of darkness by bringing them to Christ.

John's life was shaped by the stories of his birth. He knew who he was and what he was supposed to do—he knew *what* he would do. John had a sense about himself. He was not simply another child, but the one Isaiah identified: "A voice is calling out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD. In the wasteland make a level highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3, EHV).

Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, said: "Look! I am going to send Elijah the prophet to you before the great and fearful day of the LORD comes!" (Malachi 4:5, EHV). Moments after today's Gospel, Jesus identified John as the "Elijah" Malachi had spoken of: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing forcefully and forceful people are seizing it. ¹³In fact, all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴If you are willing to receive it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (Matthew 11:12-14, EHV).

Last week's Gospel spoke of John and his powerful preaching. He was so eloquent that some thought he might *himself* be the promised Messiah. John had to point them to another, one who would be even greater than he.

John was unusual, not just in the clothing he wore or the food he ate or the message he preached or the baptism he did in the Jordan river, but in his confidence and surety of who he was and what he was put on this earth to do.

II.

Those who grow up without life's ordinary disappointments often have a difficult time dealing with setbacks later in life. Children who think they are gifted in sports who get cut from the team, perhaps. Maybe someone who didn't get the job they wanted and thought they deserved. Healthy people sometimes have a difficult time dealing with old age and the health challenges that come with it. Setbacks are devastating for those who have had smooth sailing throughout their lives.

"While 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?'" (Matthew 11:2-3, EHV).

The crowds who had come to hear the eloquent preacher had been huge. John knew all the stories from his youth and was confident about who he was and what he was going to do. He had always been pretty sure of himself. Now, however, he was in prison, not because he had done anything wrong, but because he had done exactly what he was supposed to do—preach God's Word to the people.

Languishing in prison, John began to have his doubts. Oh sure, he had been told he was the one who was supposed to identify the Messiah, but maybe—just maybe—he had gotten the wrong person. If Jesus was not the Christ who had been foretold by the prophets, his whole ministry had been a waste of time.

Some scholars have a hard time with the concept that the great preacher didn't believe his own sermons. They think John just sent his disciples to see Jesus because those *followers* of John needed to have their faith reinforced. Nothing in the Bible gives any support to such a theory.

No. John, himself, had his doubts. Sitting there in the jail cell his faith wavered. Maybe he even lost it entirely before he sent his disciples to see Jesus.

Lots of Protestant Christians insist that believers *cannot* lose their faith. They say that those who *lose* faith never really *had* faith. Not so. For Christians, there is never a time when faith is far from the edge of unbelief. Satan doesn't leave Christians alone. Every day he works harder and harder to take us away from Christ. The Apostle Paul says: "So let him who thinks he stands be careful that he does not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12, EHV). The sad reality is that *preachers* can lose the faith they preach to others. Neither preachers nor hearers are immune to unbelief.

III.

Miracles always seem to be a great solution for unbelief, don't they? The rich man in Jesus' story wanted Lazarus to rise up from the dead to warn his brothers about the consequences of unbelief so they wouldn't have to share his fate in hell. Abraham reminded the rich man that his brothers had the writings of Moses and the Prophets, but the rich man didn't think they would heed the written word. Abraham told him: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31, EHV).

Jesus told John the Baptist's disciples to go back and tell John about the miracles they had seen, but John never got to see the miracles for himself. There would be no miracle that rescued John from his plight, either.

Jesus told John's disciples to give him this additional cryptic message: "Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me" (Matthew 11:6, EHV). We are to take Christ at his Word, regardless of life's circumstances.

God's Word tells us that each individual is responsible for his or her sins. God demands payment for those sins. Looking at his requirement for absolute perfection in life, and the fact that the payment for each sin is eternal death, every single human being is forced to conclude that there is no way out of eternal death.

Somehow God's demands have to be met, or we cannot go to heaven. Jesus is the One who met God's demands. Because of his special birth, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus was born without original sin. Jesus lived his entire life without ever sinning.

Jesus died on the cross, not to pay for his own sins, but to pay for someone else's. Because he is both fully God and fully human, Jesus was eligible to be the perfect sacrifice God requires for the sins of every human being who has ever lived.

When John had begun his ministry, he pointed to Jesus and said: "Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, EHV). John was right, way back then at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus wanted him to remember that time.

IV.

John the Baptist had been blessed in so many ways by God. He was the one who had the privilege of pointing to Jesus as the One who fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies. He was the one prophet who had been able to see Jesus with his own two eyes.

Jesus says: "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).

You have a greater privilege than even John the Baptist. God has given to you the completed history of his saving activity. The words and works of Jesus have been recorded so that you can taste and see the great things the Lord has done for you.

Live as one who has learned to know of the Savior's great love for you. "Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me" (Matthew 11:6, EHV). Your anticipation for Christmas is matched and exceeded only by the reality that your Lord Jesus lived and died so that your soul might live eternally with him.

Lord, let me be just the least in the kingdom of heaven, for even the least is great—even greater than John. God bless your Advent worship of your Savior and King. Amen.