

December 11, 2022

The Third Sunday of Advent

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Matthew 11:2-11



When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'*

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

For any here this morning whose faith, whose spiritual life, is less than rock-solid, good job coming to church today, because today's Gospel reading is for you! In it we learn that John the Baptist, Jesus' own cousin, the man equipped by God to be a prophet preparing the way for Jesus himself, John the Baptist whom Jesus describes as the greatest among everyone born "of a woman," this John the Baptist who personally knew Jesus Christ, who listened to Jesus' words and presumably saw at least some of Jesus' great deeds—we read today that this John the Baptist struggled, like you and like me, with perplexing spiritual questions and deep religious doubts.

Now John had been locked up in prison by the local ruler Herod for speaking against Herod's immoral lifestyle, and we see in this passage that prison life has begun to wear down John's spiritual strength. As we heard last week, before his arrest, John boldly, even dramatically, shouts out to any who will listen about the coming of Jesus, describing Jesus as one "more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. [One who] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." This is the John who preaches hellfire and brimstone to the complacent religious establishment, the John who knows beyond any doubt who Jesus is, the John who confidently announces the otherworldly power that Jesus bears. But then, in a dramatic reversal, the months languishing in prison take their toll, and suddenly John doesn't know who Jesus is anymore: gone is John's confident assurance that Jesus

comes from on high, bearing the Holy Spirit. Now, in a prison cell, John's faith is shaken, and he questions whether Jesus really is the promised one, or whether he should be waiting for someone else.

Now maybe you are one of the lucky few who have managed to cultivate a mature spiritual life without at least one season of deep doubts or shaken faith, but if you are anything like me—and I think like most people—you may well have had to navigate at least one John-the-Baptist period in making it this far as a Christian. And if you haven't had the pleasure of a John-the-Baptist period yet, don't worry, such periods have a remarkable knack of finding you along the way—usually when you don't feel particularly prepared to deal with them. But the good news is that if they don't manage to completely kill off your faith, these periods of inner doubts and spiritual distress often sow the seeds of rich spiritual growth later on down the road.

For me personally I wouldn't be standing here now as an Episcopalian curate about to be ordained as a priest next month if it weren't for a very perplexing period of deep spiritual doubt. As you may know, I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church but instead in a much more conservative evangelical environment. I learned pretty early in life about my inherent sinfulness, my need for a personal Savior, and the sole pathway of faith in Jesus for accessing forgiveness and salvation. But, beginning in my mid-20s, this neat and tidy theology began to encounter some serious turbulence through three major waves which crashed down upon it. The first, somewhat ironically, was my decision after college to become an evangelical missionary, a choice which—as I've mentioned before—eventually took me to Lhasa, Tibet. While I was in Lhasa ostensibly trying to convert Tibetan Buddhists, my own faith was being nuanced, complicated, and challenged, as I (for really the first time in my life) was outside my Christian bubble, and my pat theological answers about the eternal destiny of everyone's soul and the precise mechanics of how salvation works were revealed as far too simplistic for the real world. Now, if moving to Tibet didn't fully thrust me out of my evangelical bubble, my second "wave"—getting married to Shoko—surely did. There are few things in life like marriage to wake you up from adolescent daydreams and force you, quite quickly, into adulthood. Like throwing a bucket of ice water upon a serenely snoozing teenager, my wedding day thrust me into a cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and even cross-religious marriage, which rapidly exposed the limits of my cozy, but rather superficial, spiritual certainties. And then on top of everything else, moving to Cambridge to study the Bible critically at Harvard Divinity School, with professors who are much more likely to be disciples of Karl Marx than of Jesus Christ—this effectively served as a third tsunami wave to crash down upon my childhood faith. And so, stripped by these three waves of

my spiritual clothing, I endured a very unpleasant period of spiritual nakedness, totally lacking any spiritual garments that fit anymore, until after a lengthy period of searching, I stumbled my way into the Episcopal Church—and to make a very long story short—found, especially in the Episcopal celebration of the Eucharist, a refreshing engagement with holy Mystery, a spiritual space where I could encounter the Living God in a manner that transcends the limits of reason and rationality, a nourishing religious community where I could cultivate sacred relationships (with God and others) while simultaneously holding in tension the nuances, paradoxes, and sometimes outright contradictions that characterize our Christian faith and tradition. But, the point is that I never would have had the opportunity to discover this more nourishing holy Mystery if I had not seen my earlier spiritual certainties so unpleasantly stripped away from me.

In this very messy but ultimately transformative process, my experience echoes a broadly similar script as in John’s case and as in most cases of people who go through dry periods of spiritual doubt and distress. Because note how Jesus responds—and does not respond—to John’s question: John, wasting away in prison, asks Jesus if he really is the promised one or whether John should put his hope in someone else. Remarkably, despite John’s obvious suffering, Jesus does not solve John’s immediate problem or even answer his question directly: Jesus does not remove the suffering that has pulled John down into his spiritual depression; Jesus does not go to John’s prison and miraculously release his bonds; nor does Jesus even give John a straight yes/no answer to his spiritual questions. Rather, being the brilliant teacher that Jesus was, he invites John to see things in a new light and to thereby make the connections himself. Jesus knows that just giving John the straightforward answers that he’s looking for isn’t what John really needs. Yes/no answers might alleviate his spiritual doubts for a mere moment but, particularly amidst the suffering of his prison cell, John needs something far more transformative: John needs a bit of prodding to work through his doubts and to embrace Jesus as his Messiah for himself, not because someone else (even Jesus) tells him that that is the right answer.

And so rather than simply addressing John’s surface question (“are you the one who is to come?”), Jesus invites his cousin to reflect carefully on the things Jesus is doing—giving sight to the blind, providing hearing for the deaf, granting new life to those who have died—and to use that information in order to work through his doubts and, thereby, to reach a new depth of trust in Jesus.

And likewise, in the second half of this morning’s passage, Jesus behaves in a similar manner with the crowds around him. Master

teacher that he is, Jesus uses a series of rhetorical questions to prompt and prod the crowds to consider why they are so interested in John and John's message. Three times Jesus asks those around him, "what did you come to see?" What are you looking for? Why did you travel all the way out to the wilderness? Why are you here?

And similarly, Jesus remains always the good teacher still today, one who does not just superficially give us the answers to our questions but points out the way, illuminates the path, and prods us forward with his own questions pulling at our heartstrings, so that we might learn how to make the connections ourselves, so that we might grow in our own heart-level commitments to Jesus.

What spiritual questions, maybe even doubts, are on your heart today? Why has my family member gotten sick? Why did my friend pass away? Why am I struggling with such-and-such an issue at work, in my family, in my finances, with my health, with my neighbor, with God? Like John the Baptist, we cry out to Jesus, "hey Jesus, I am languishing here, and what are you gonna do about it? Are you really who you claim to be, or should I be looking for someone else?" And Jesus, most of the time, takes in our outcry and our questions, does not respond directly, but finds a way to shift our gaze and expand our perspective, often asking us questions, and thereby inviting us to discover a deeper reservoir of spiritual resources that we never even knew was there. For John, this discovery required reflecting on the miraculous healing Jesus was providing to seemingly everyone but him. How about for you? Where might Jesus be inviting your gaze to go deeper? Where might Jesus be at work around you, and perhaps even within you, in ways you haven't realized thus far? Particularly in this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' unexpected arrival in a dirty manger of all places, may we take time to reflect on the overlooked Jesus in our lives, the Jesus who is present in particular activities, in places, and in people whom we may well have not associated with Jesus up to now. May we look for Jesus in these unexpected areas. May we, like John the Baptist twenty centuries ago, find the answers to our spiritual questions in ways we do not expect, and find spiritual sustenance from reservoirs we have long overlooked.

The kingdom Jesus brings has always—from day one of Jesus in the manger—been an unexpected and unusual kingdom. Jesus, the almighty son of God, does not even use his power to free his innocent cousin from a putrid prison, a prison in which John ultimately is murdered. Neither does Jesus use his power to rescue himself from his own eventual murder at the hands of the political elite. Jesus' kingdom and Jesus' ways make little sense to our earthly way of thinking, to our limited, here-and-now logic, but Jesus invites us—just as he invited

his cousin John—into a different logic, into the otherworldly brilliance of his upside-down kingdom, where the meek (not the murderous) inherit the earth, where the peacemakers (not the powerful) are blessed, and where love (not power and not even death) has the very last word.

Why are you here this morning? As Jesus asked the crowds, “what did you come here to see? To experience?” What are you looking for here? What do you desire this Advent? Jesus invites us this Advent to bring to him our desires, including our questions and our doubts, but while doing so, be prepared like John the Baptist to not receive an immediate, standard, or expected response. Be prepared instead for an invitation, an invitation to listen and to look in new and deeper ways, an invitation into a logic that literally makes no sense but yet inexplicably somehow addresses your deepest doubts and answers your heart’s deepest longings by revealing to you glimpses of a whole other world.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cover image: *St. John the Baptist in Prison Visited by Two Disciples*, by Giovanni di Paolo, 1403-1482.

