

Doubting God

King of Glory Lutheran
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Advent 3: Year A: Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As 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? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

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

¹¹Truly 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.”

Who among us hasn't been disappointed in God, struggled with God, or at the very least doubted what God is up to in our lives? This is John's story on our third weekend in Advent when real life hits John in the face. Perhaps this is our story also this Christmas season. (Credit to Rev. David Lose, Working Preacher)

I went to visit a member this week in a care facility. It's a lovely place with kind nurses and staff. What caught my eye in the open living room was the bright red and white fuzzy stockings hung in a row. Instead of personalized names on each one, they were decorated quite simply with a room number. Whoever is the person that cannot be in their own home on Christmas day will at least have a stocking with goodies. They will wake up, and perhaps their first thought will be, “It's Christmas!” and then their second thought might be, “Oh, I'm still here.”

John is doing a bit of the same thing, only instead of a room not his own, he has a cell of his own. Where is the emboldened preacher from just last week? “Prepare the way!” Where is the one standing in the river dousing people with water from whence, he got his name – the Baptizer? Now we see him all alone, with only his thoughts to keep him company. Certainly, John has his doubts, or else he wouldn't send one of his own disciples to ask Jesus the question once and for all.

“Are you the one? Or are we to wait for another?”

Here John is, months after he baptized the Lord. Life has taken a turn for the worse due to his imprisonment under King Herod. When John baptized his adult cousin, Jesus, John expected the world to change. Citing the prophet Isaiah, John believed that Jesus was the promised Savior, sent by God, for all the Israelite people. The long awaited – 700 years long awaited - Messiah had come. John had expectations of how the Messiah would act. But now, he’s sitting on the hard cold floor of a prison cell. Where was his Savior?

Who among us hasn’t been disappointed in God, struggled with God, or at the very least doubted what God is up to in our lives? We might ask, how did we get here?

As Christians we say we live in the now and the not yet. We live in the present moment while we are waiting for Jesus’ return to redeem and restore all of us and all of creation. Straddling these two worlds can be particularly painful at this time of year when supposedly ‘it’s the hap-hap-piest time of year.’

The commercials don’t stop with the hungry children’s eyes looking longingly into ours. Wars far away continue and refugees being bussed to Denver put the city into high-speed action. Closer to home, there is less money to buy Christmas gifts when the grocery bill eats into our budget. Health care professionals report emotional darkness descending upon all kinds of people around the holidays. Even church feels not quite right at the moment. Yet we still proclaim that Christ is about to be born and change all of it.

No wonder John is confused. We can be too! When John said, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,” that’s what people did! They rejoiced the political powers over them would be conquered and dispelled. They repented, changed their hearts, and readied themselves to hear a new message. We have too!

We know that scripture says we walk by faith and not sight. Dear Lord, these are times that can test our trust in you. Our confidence gets shaken. More than one of us is lying awake wondering what the coming months will bring. Or our palms get sweaty before the Dr comes in, even if it is Christmas. Children will absolutely use the coats we bought for them, and they’ll likely need another one next season. We too, are waiting for the promise of “peace on earth, good-will towards all” to be revealed.

Learning to live in the tension that John was experiencing is how our faith grows also. We learn to straddle God's promises made and then in God's timing, those promises are kept.

Jesus tells John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." It's likely not the simple, yes or no, answer John was hoping for.

But Jesus response implies the Kingdom is coming and is in fact, here. Look around you. See God's ever-present activity. Sick people are healed, food is given to the hungry, and refugees find a bed. This is the work of the Savior, the Messiah. God Immanuel. Jesus truly is doing what He said He would do.

And Jesus is bringing the Kingdom to the ones who most need it! Not those who sit in royal palaces wearing royal robes. No – Jesus' answer reveals that God is with the least, the last, and the lost. God is with those who are down and out. The folks who are at the end of their rope, who have nothing left to hope in, but the Lord, Himself.

Perhaps that's why we hear this text on this third weekend of Advent. For it speaks to us in our weakness; in our moments of doubt. John, who gave 110%, was about ready to give up. He thought he was on the right track, preaching for God. Now, his very life is hanging in the balance.

Isn't it comforting to know that when our lives hang in the balance, Jesus is there for us? When we find ourselves in complete need of a Savior, when nothing else has worked and we're at the end of our rope? The very God we need is kneeling at our bedside. He is holding our hand in the Dr's office. He is handing us the stocking decorated only with our room number. He is breathing confidence into our hearts, so that we know what step the very right next step is.

The beautiful Christmas concerts are amazing. The lighted trees at Centerra and all along Eisenhower are fantastic. Stunning! And...Jesus is the one and only who we can trust with all of our lives; the one in whom we live and move and have our being. He chooses to come despite our doubts and fears, and even our question: Are you really the One?

The Savior is alive. He is coming and in fact, Jesus is already here! Amen.

