

Matthew 11:2-11
Advent III 2025

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist gets his chance to shine for the second week in a row. Advent truly is his season, his chance to take center stage and share his message about the coming of the Savior across the years. John is not just a prophet for that first Advent of God, the voice in the wilderness heralding Jesus' first arrival. John is a prophet for now, for those of us still here waiting for the second Advent of God, for the second coming of Christ, when all things will finally be made well and whole and good when Jesus comes to reign again. John's message for his first listeners remains just as powerful now, as we take our turn at waiting for Christ: repent, turn toward God with our whole hearts, and look with hope to the God who has promised to come and be with us. Stay watchful, John reminds us; the message we sit with and reflect on most of all in this Church season. Stay awake, keep alert, and look for God.

In last week's Gospel reading, we saw John in his prime, a powerful prophet, a star on the rise. It's his voice in the wilderness that draws people out of the safe cities, their comfortable lives, to travel to the desert to hear his sermon of repentance, the good news that God is drawing near, and to be baptized by John. Yes, last week's Gospel showed us the John the Baptist that most of us know, the man clothed in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey, and preaching a fiery message for all who would seek to call themselves followers of God. That's the version of John we think about when we think of John the Baptist: the feisty preacher, the eccentric dreamer, the voice calling us to look for God and prepare the path.

But a lot has changed for poor John between this Sunday's Gospel reading and the last. This week, we see a very different version of John. Today, John sits in prison, locked away for

daring to call out those in power, namely Herod and his family, of whom John has run afoul. As is often the case with prophets, John has become unpopular for pointing out what people are doing wrong, and, if history has shown us anything, it's that people in power rarely like to be told they're wrong. John will eventually lose his life, another common story for prophets, for his feud with Herod and his wife. But for today, John merely sits in prison, lowly, lonely, and powerless.

It is from his prison cell that John sends his disciples to Jesus. John who has been the person to announce the arrival of the Messiah, who has greeted Jesus at the Jordan River, baptized him, and heard the voice from Heaven, John who has heard and seen all this, has come to doubt. Was he wrong about Jesus, he wonders from his exile in prison? Did he name the wrong person as Messiah? Tell me plainly, John says to Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

At this point, I'll say that I love when our Biblical characters remind us that they are just people like us, flawed, imperfect, doubting, and scared. We often have this idea that the people God works with in the Bible are somehow better than we are, more perfect, more gifted, more faithful. But stories like this remind us that people are just people, still just humans who are so easily ruled by fear, or doubt, or anger, imperfect as we are. I love stories like this, because it means that God's not waiting for us to be perfect or better or holier, whatever that means, for God to work with us, to be with us, and to call us into amazing things, just like the people we read about in the Bible. Yes, here we see John in a moment of very human doubt, scared, alone, imprisoned, and seeking reassurance that the hope he dared to place in Jesus, that he was the long-promised, and long-awaited Messiah, was well-founded and placed.

To understand John's doubt, we need to look back at the message he shared in last week's Gospel, at the words he used to herald the beginning of the ministry of the Messiah. From the desert, John told of the coming Messiah as the great judge of the nations and all people. His words, the ones we heard last week, are difficult. John leans into the vengeance of God, the wrath of one who will come to separate the wheat from the chaff, whose ax is lying at the root of the tree, ready to cut down any and all that are not bearing good fruit for the kingdom of God. John's short message from last week's Gospel mentions fire and burning no less than three times. John, it seems, was expecting God to come as swift and terrible vengeance, a judge for a sinful broken world. John knows his scripture, it's the very same scripture we heard this morning from Isaiah, you can see it right there in your bulletin: "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." John is expecting a Messiah who will change everything, drastically, suddenly, fiercely, maybe even angrily. That's the Messiah John preached about in the desert. That's the Messiah John expected.

His expectations of who Jesus will be and what Jesus will do cloud his perception of who Jesus actually is and the ministry Jesus is actually accomplishing. To John's questioning disciples, Jesus provides a simple answer: tell John what you see and hear – 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. In short, Jesus has come to set the world right, but it is through a ministry of compassion, a mission of love for the lost, the lowly, and the least of these, through which Jesus will accomplish his work of salvation. Jesus, of course, knows his scripture, too, just like John. To answer John's question about whether he is the Messiah John's been waiting for, Jesus takes the same passage from Isaiah, the one we heard this morning, and takes it a step

further, reminding John that the Messiah's ministry includes all the things Jesus has been up to: curing, healing, saving, and caring.

For all of John's expectations of the Messiah, John has missed the point. He's read the same passage of scripture that Jesus quotes to him but has only focused on one part – God's wrath and judgement. Jesus instead comes with a ministry of compassion, one in which the lowest, sickest, least powerful people are lifted up. John only looked for a vengeful warrior, and so he begins to doubt the suffering servant. We, too, when we're honest with ourselves, can be tempted to look only for God in the places and ways we think God will show up. But God defies human logic, human understand, and the (so sadly limited) human imagination.

The season of Advent tells us to keep awake, to remain watchful for the coming Messiah. The trick is letting ourselves see God as God is, not as we want God to be. The good news that the season of Advent prepares us for is that God shows up, always, that God is present with us. As we await the second coming of Christ, we remember in the meantime the truth that God, the Emmanuel, is with us even now and in all things. Our prayer this season should be that we have the ability to perceive God very much at work in the world and in our lives.

Yes, this season is embodied by John the Baptist, in all his many forms, in all his many feelings. Advent is a season for dreamers, hopers, patient waiters. But advent is also a season for doubters, for the lost, the confused, the desperate. The good news is that, wherever you are, however you feel, God arrives. God breaks in. God answers. Because God isn't waiting for us to be perfect, it's not really about what we do at all. It's about God. God cares for us, so nothing will stop God. God loves us, so nothing will get in the way of God's salvation.

