

Rev. Susie Putzke
Advent 2 - John the Baptist
Insisting on Hope this Advent
Matthew 11:1-11

Our text today is the first time we encounter John in the book of Matthew. For those of you less familiar with my pal John the Baptist or JTB as I affectionately call him. I'd love to tell you about him! He truly is one of my favorites! He's all the things and more. Rough around the edges, a truth teller, brave in the face of authority and a bit provocative.

We often encounter John the Baptist in the season of Advent. Last week Pastor Leah spoke of Zachariah (his dad) and Elizabeth (his mom). Zechariah was the man who felt fear in an encounter with an angel who invited him to not be afraid. The Angel came with news that the prayers of he and his wife Elizabeth had been answered and that they were to bear a son. We talked about how our fear, at its best, can keep us safe and of Zachariah's abilities despite fear and despite being rendered speechless to still proclaim God's goodness and point to God's presence in his midst.

We typically hear John's story beginning in his infancy, when his mother Elizabeth is pregnant and is visited by Mary (her cousin) shortly after Mary had her own encounter with an angel who informed her she is to have a child (Jesus).

John is marked as "special" from the very beginning when he leaps inside his mother's womb as the pregnant Mary approaches. For our catholic friends this movement is the origin story of the Hail Mary, confirming to both Elizabeth and Mary that she is indeed carrying the son of God... but more on this next week!

The Gospel of Matthew does not include those delightful stories of John as an infant. Our text today begins with John as an adult. He was the son of a priest. It was presumed that he would grow up to be just like his dad. But, instead of a priest he became a prophet. I trust many envisioned him going to rabbinical school but instead he went in to the wilderness. No doubt they expected him to be Kosher and refined but John was quite the opposite and opted for a more simple diet of food from the earth. He traded a clergy robe for camel skins. His ministry did not start in a fancy temple but in the desert.

One way he did take after his father was how he too, skillfully made God's presence known in the world.

Despite the wilderness being his sanctuary John had quite a platform and quite a following. He was a fiery preacher who often issued warnings that the kingdom of God was at hand and urged people to repent and be baptized. People went out of their way and out of the cities to be in his

presence and hear his words in the desert. The more he preached, the more the crowds seemed to grow.

What we know about John's preaching earlier in the gospel was that it was persuasive and powerful and he continued what he did from early on: preparing the way of the Lord. We are perhaps familiar with some of the best lines from John's ministry... *"I baptize with water, he will baptize you with the holy spirit."* *"The one who is coming is greater than I, I am not fit to tie his sandal."*

John served as quite the sidekick to Jesus and collaboratively they were making a real impact. Together they were responsible for quite a movement!

However...

John as an enthusiastic and passionate preacher surrounded by people is not where we encounter him in our scripture texts today.

Instead, We find John alone, not outside but inside, not surrounded, but isolated in a prison cell. All of that bold talking and going toe to toe with authority in this case (going toe to toe with Herod) has caught up with him and he finds himself in prison. I think it's safe to say that this was NOT how John expected his ministry with Jesus to end. After all, him and Jesus's movement were only gaining momentum prior to his arrest.

So here John sits, in the confines of prison, only occasionally getting details relayed about Jesus' ongoing ministry without him. Only occasionally getting a glimpse of what was happening in the outside world and I think the cumulative impact of this is what leads John into a place of significant doubt and perhaps even despair.

Now I have not been arrested or spent time in jail...yet.

But I, like many of us in the room, have stood toe to toe with people of power only for it to go both well and terribly, I have run my mouth in ways that have caused consequences for me for many years, beginning early on when my mother used to wash my mouth out with soap. But, in all seriousness, I know myself well enough to know that I would not be in a good place if I, like John, was isolated. I would not be in a good headspace if I was silenced and unable to share thoughts and ideas. I, like John, would have many questions and wonderings about my life, its purpose and if I had done anything good at all. I for sure would have questions like, has any of this mattered?

Hope in a time of fear and suffering can feel impossible.

These reflections on my own limits and fears came into sharper focus when I learned what a friend of mine recently endured.

A colleague of mine from Seminary just spent some time in a holding cell. She was one of many Spiritual Leaders part of a peaceful gathering near Chicago outside of an ICE processing center. She and several others faith leaders almost daily were present standing to bear witness of all that was taking place around their community. They would meet up outside along with many other bystanders and observers and lead the crowds in worship. Singing songs and on this particular day holding up items that represented the needs of their neighbors being detained... Objects reflecting one's right to have access to lawyers, the right of dignity and sanitary conditions and the right to have access to spiritual care.

At one point in their gathering the faith leaders linked arms and entered the street. They'd on some level must have felt hope diminishing and felt the need to take it a step further (literally). In this they crossed a parameter (be it physical or imaginary) I don't know, and were immediately met by city and state police with tasers and batons.

One woman was knocked to the ground and images of my friend being dragged out in her clergy collar were aired on multiple news platforms. So she and 21 faith leaders were arrested and found themselves in a holding cell. She shared that the women in their group were detained for several hours and the men, for several more prior to being released. So needless to say they had time to sit with their thoughts and weary hearts and I can only imagine that hope wavered.

After hours of detainment she was released to return to her family, her bed and the amenities that her privilege provides her. Those faith leaders in that time in a holding facility were benched their ministry like John the Baptist interrupted/halted.

Their public ministry was paused with little to no updates on what followed after their removal from the scene, no information about what was going on in the rest of the world or any further details about the lives of the people they were advocating for.

When I hear these stories from my friend and others like it from our own community my heart hurts. I know this is something most people of faith share, that sometimes despite our faith doubt creeps in. Like John we ache, we wonder, and we long for something different.

And yet, woven through all that doubt is the quiet thread of hope that refuses to let go. Something that outlasts, something that sustains. So despite the aching I am inspired. I am inspired by John that even in great moments of doubt he sends his friends to Jesus for clarity and assurance that the vision holds and that he is still indeed the one. I don't blame John that from his cell he is questioning. I don't hold fault that he is wanting to know if his efforts had even had an impact, that his time he devoted to the cause was worth it.

Here, even in his doubt I see John pointing back to Jesus and a ministry and a movement that has endured and outlasted the many fears throughout history.

We have a responsibility to hold fast to the enduring presence of God in all situations. We must ask ourselves to whom we are pointing to. Whose will and whose way are we working to make room for in this Advent Season?

I am inspired by the courage, and bravery of you all, I am bolstered by the diverse voices in our communities speaking out for justice in the world.

And bit by bit we rekindle a communal sense of hope in our current context and reorient back to the ONE.

On Wednesday, several members from our church and the community gathered at the St. Cloud Library to show solidarity with our Somali neighbors and friends. I wasn't sure what to expect upon my arrival. I showed up with a heavy heart and some fear. To be honest I entered the space somewhat disparagingly. But looking around, I was moved by the amount of hope that was burning in the room. The Hope shared by all levels of leadership, from school board members to senators. The hope that was held and shared despite us being of different faith backgrounds, despite our diversity.

We heard speaker after speaker share messages of unity and the gifts of our collective power. Strength in community, and solidarity in our shared call to love one another. People gave witness to their life experiences, examples of perseverance through times of adversity and persecution.

It was reminiscent of a “we shall overcome moment” but also a message of how we as human beings connected by one another created in the image of God will also outlast this moment. We must! Just as the ministry of Jesus continues during John's incarceration. Just like we continue the work of Jesus long after his death and resurrection. The work of Jesus was not yet completed in John's lifetime. nor is it in ours... But we are called to be light barriers in dark times.

Hope that trembles is still hope!

This work is ours to see through.

Friends, this sermon is hard because many of us find ourselves in John's prison cell with very similar questions. We all need reassurance that our lives and our work have purpose and meaning.

We need ever present reminders that the reign of God has outlasted and outshined the many pains of our past and burns brightly till through our current fears. We are reminded today of our responsibility in this moment to point God's presence amidst it all.

Our call as people of faith is to light candles of hope and peace and joy and **love.. To hold candles for our friends when their tank of hope runs low.**

Our call is to fan the flame of love of neighbor

This is the work of the community.

We are community

We are together

We are loved

We are gifted grace and courage and strength for the journey

This is why we sing songs of hope together.

This is why we give our time and our offering in confidence it will make an impact.

This is why we meet up at events that speak to our hearts

Why we feed hungry people?

And collectively this is the work of Advent. This is the work of John the Baptist. Making Christ known in the world here and now. Through good times and hard times, when it is simple and when it feels impossible.

Gather together.

Reach for Joy.

Share your Faith.

I am preaching to myself today as much or more than I am preaching to you....

Shattered faith is authentic faith

Shattered hope is still hope.

Thanks be to God.