

A Advent 3 12.15.19

Matthew 11:2-11

Focus Statement: Look and listen, Jesus is the one who is to come.

Well, the lectionary gives us John the Baptist again this week. And like most sequels, it's not as exciting as the original. Last week we had John as the "voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." This morning we have him in prison, asking of Jesus, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" What happened to our wild man in the wilderness, eating bugs and shouting "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"?

In fairness to John, this text has jumped us all the way to chapter eleven. A lot happened since we last saw John in the wilderness way back in chapter three, and none of it looked much like John had described. John spoke of the coming of one who was more powerful than him, one whose sandals he would not even be worthy to carry. One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, who like an ax, would cut down those who do not bear good fruit, to be burned with unquenchable fire. But what John had seen in the ensuing nine chapters involved a lot less burning. In fact, there wasn't any fire at all that I could find. First Jesus went up a mountain and talked about how the poor, the meek, and the hungry would be blessed for three chapters. Preview of coming attractions, we'll deep-dive into that in January and February, mark your calendars. Then he came down from the mountain and performed some legit miracles: healing a leper, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law and a whole bunch of other people who happened to be around the neighborhood, two people possessed by demons, a paralytic, a hemorrhaging woman, two blind men and one man who was both mute AND had a demon. He also calmed a storm and

raised a girl from the dead. So, yes, a lot of impressive stuff. But do you see what was missing from John's proclamation? Judgment. No one got judged, at least not in an obvious way. No one got cut off, cut down, or destroyed. Jesus said some more eschatological things—eschatological remember being our vocab word from a couple weeks ago, meaning “words about the last”—talking about not being afraid, gathering up the harvest, and gaining or losing the reward. But in terms of actual burning in unquenchable fire, not so much.

And John was concerned about this because John's world looked like one that was in need of some judgment. First century Palestine, remember was the time of the *Pax Romana*, the “Peace of Rome.” And the so-called “peace of Rome” wasn't peaceful, it was oppressive. Yes there wasn't out and out warfare or riots in the streets, but that's because the population was held in place by ruthless Roman soldiers, excessive taxes, and the selling out of those whose role it was to protect the people to serve their own greed. The Pharisees and Sadducees whom John called a “brood of vipers,” were getting richer and more powerful, and all of Jesus' incredible healing miracles must have seemed to John like trying to protect your home from a forest fire with a garden hose. John wanted it to burn out of control, so that a whole new thing would spring up in its place.

And to be frank, I get John's concern. I even get John's desire for this whole mess to be wiped away and a new one to take its place. I drafted this on Wednesday, and right here was a line about how there hadn't been a school shooting this week, and when she replied, she shared there had been two school shootings in Wisconsin and her local school was

closed due to a “credible threat.” More times than I’d ever imagined could be possible so early into my career I’ve felt the need to completely scrap my sermon and start over because of some major catastrophe. There are still families being separated at our southern border. The war in Syria is still racking up death and destruction. The glaciers in Greenland are melting at an alarming rate, the rate of income inequality continues to widen. Oh, and the rate of opioid-related death in Calhoun county is twice the rate of the rest of the state, in case you wanted some good news closer to home. I could go on. And this is two-thousand years after John first asked the question, “are you the one who is to come?” I’m not, as you know, a believer in the whole “rapture theology” concept, the theory that God will remove all the faithful from the earth before destroying what remains in violent and bloody battle of death and destruction. I can give you the historical, scriptural, and theological reasons why I don’t adhere to that viewpoint, but that’s really a bible study topic not a sermon point. So I’ll leave it alone except to say that while I don’t believe it, I do get the popularity of it and the comfort some find in it. It’s a simple answer to a complex question, to be able to say, “yes, things are bad, but that’s because God’s going to destroy it and start again.” Terrifying, but simple.

John too craved a simple answer. Things are bad, Herod is a crook, the Roman Empire is oppressive and destruction, people are suffering. Jesus, you claimed to be the Son of God and bringer of the kingdom of heaven, now show up and be that. Take out the powerful with some axes and unquenchable fire and institute your own kingdom in its place. Or did I hope for the wrong person? Did I announce the wrong one?

And I love how Jesus responded, because Jesus gave John's disciples such a simple answer, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Jesus didn't make claims of his authenticity or titles. He didn't berate John for doubting him, didn't command or demand John's loyalty. Instead, he took John back to the basic role of the prophet, "Go and tell what you hear and see." That, remember, is the role of a prophet. Not to predict the future, but to see the present for how it truly is, and to testify, to bear witness, to that truth. What comes of that truth-telling is out of the prophet's hands. And there's more even than that layered in Jesus' words. Hearing and seeing in the Gospels are the first entrance points into discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus starts not with proclaiming allegiance, confessing faith, or some other act of intellectual assent. Being a disciple of Jesus starts first with seeing, so that "soon you will see greater things than these."

Notice also what Jesus reminded John's disciples they had seen. "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." If those words sounded familiar when you heard me say them during the Gospel, that's because you heard Laurie read a version of them. Isaiah chapter thirty-five, verses five and six, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." It's key that Jesus reference Isaiah, because remember who John was. John was "the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke," so this reference back to Isaiah was familiar ground for John.

Another thing that occurred to me about Jesus directing John's attention to these actions that seemed to fall short of the upending John had expected is that John won't get to see the end of the story, John won't live until the resurrection. John, you may remember, gets killed by Herod in chapter fourteen. John is never going to get to see the great upheaval of the crucifixion, when "darkness came over the whole land" and "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split." John didn't get to see the completion of his proclamation; he only saw the start. What we see from Jesus here is assurance for John in the middle of the journey, that what he could see only in part would come into fullness, that his work would indeed "bear fruit worthy of repentance."

And that, dear people of God, is the good news for us today. We, though resurrection people, like John live in the time between Christ has come and Christ will come again. We do not get to see the unfolding of the whole picture, we see only a foretaste of the feast to come. But that we see the kingdom only in bits and pieces, a piece of bread and a sip of wine, does not mean that the kingdom is not still coming, that the kingdom is not already here. And the gift of the stillness of Advent is how it, like Jesus did for John, calls us to hear and see. The Tree of Wishes went up last Sunday, and we are already down to one envelope. For many years this congregation had no children, and now there are days when we struggle to hear over them. The expanse of empty lot behind our building now spends its summers as a thriving community garden. Woman's Co-op is creating a video project to project the voices of those in our community who are so often overlooked and unheard. Friends, hear and see these signs of the kingdom.

Hear and see, and then go and tell. Because the other good news of this passage is that we, like John, have a role to play. We are called not just to be witness but to bear witness. To be prophets ourselves, to take our place in bringing into being the unfolding kingdom of heaven. And just as we are called to hear and see God in ways both large and small, going and telling requires actions of all types and sizes. We don't all have to be John the Baptist, no witness of the kingdom is too small to matter to God. Write a check to support an organization you care about, buy a cup of coffee for the person behind you in line, come in on a weekday and strike up a conversation with a Co-op member you haven't met before, thank them for using our space during the week. Visit one of our homebound members, let someone in front of you in traffic, invite your neighbor to come with you to worship. Any and all of these actions are ways that we go and tell the good news of God. So see and hear, go and tell. Thanks be to God. Amen.