

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 15, 2013
Advent 3
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Last week's Gospel lesson introduced us to John the Baptist, the brash, rough-and-tumble preacher out in the Judean wilderness who was calling on people to change their lives and to prepare for the coming Messiah.

John's message was blunt and forthright. The coming One will not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Even now the ax is at the root of the tree, and the wheat is ready to be gathered into the barn.

But today's Gospel lesson strikes me as odd and out-of-place. We've gone from John confidently preaching his fire and brimstone message of repentance, and we've skipped ahead ten chapters in the story of Jesus' ministry.

And now the once brash and confident John finds himself in a dark prison cell. This is the same John who baptized Jesus and proclaimed him as the Chosen One. But several months (perhaps longer) have elapsed since that day. And having received word about what Jesus has been doing in the meantime, apparently John is now having second thoughts. So he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus: *Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?*

To be fair to John, his “crisis of confidence” should not really surprise us. He is, after all, in prison. And, what he originally predicted and has longed for has just not happened.

For when John proclaimed Jesus as the Chosen One, he expected the world to change *right now*. And now, a long time has passed, and things seem dreadfully the same. What John expected was that Jesus would be the climax of all God’s promises to Israel RIGHT NOW. But as he sits in a dark prison cell, he is still waiting for that promise to be kept. He is anxious. He is concerned.

Perhaps more honestly, he is *disappointed*. This is not the same John we heard from last week.

Truth be told, many of us can identify with John. Like him, we are still waiting for the kingdom promise to arrive in its fullness. The Christmas promise of “peace on earth, good will toward men” is at one and the same time both what is *wonderful* about this time of year, and what is so *difficult* about this time of year. Difficult because we see that peace in our homes and in our world is as scarce today as ever. Difficult because as we celebrate the *promise* of Jesus taking center stage in life, the reality is that in the world where we live, Jesus seems to be pushed increasingly to the margins of irrelevance.

John’s question, it seems to me, is a legitimate one. It can easily become our question as well. For the promises of this season -- and the tensions they create --

can sometimes bring to the surface *our* disappointments with ourselves, the world, and with God. As my skeptical high school English teacher said to me many years ago: “You Christians have been saying that Jesus is coming for over 2,000 years now, but I’ve yet to see anything out of him!”

To make matters worse, I don’t think that Jesus’ answer to John’s question would have been very satisfying to John. Jesus says: “Go tell John what you see and hear.” But John is already aware of what Jesus has been doing, which is what has prompted his doubts in the first place!

Jesus then continues: “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 preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

This was definitely NOT the answer John was expecting. What John was looking for was a Messiah who was *strong*, a Messiah who helps those who help themselves, a Messiah who knows how to stand up for himself, a Messiah who won’t take any lip from anyone. In short, John was looking for a Messiah you could be proud of.

Instead, John gets Jesus. And measured against John’s hopes and expectations, Jesus probably falls disappointingly short. After all, the people who preoccupy Jesus are not the movers and shakers of the world. The folks on Jesus’ heart and mind are the lame, the deaf, the ill, the poor, and the dead. These folks

don't move or shake anything. These folks are moved and shaken by those with wealth, power, and influence. These people aren't going to change anything. They are the losers and outcasts of the day. They can barely fend for themselves, let alone help anyone else.

Why in the world does Jesus make such a fuss about *these* folks when all John has done is to ask for some sign that Jesus is indeed the One for whom he has been waiting?

Maybe it's because John now has something in common with these folks. He shares in common with them the sense of *absolute need and dependence*. Here is John, with his charismatic personality, his earlier influence, and even a group of disciples. But despite all of that, he is now pacing back and forth in a cell, completely dependent and in need. He is like those Jesus mentions. He can boast of nothing except his dependence on God's mercy and protection.

Maybe this is what Jesus means when he says: "blessed is the one who is not offended by me." I've always been puzzled by this statement.

But then I began to ask myself, "who are those who are most offended by the message of Christianity? Who are the folks who "push back" the hardest against the message of Christ and the Cross?"

In my experience, it is often those who consider themselves *self-sufficient*. Those who consider themselves self-made, independent, and who have made their

own way in this world. Those whose mantra is, “I can do it myself.” Those for whom *weakness* and *vulnerability* are four letter words. Those who refuse to see themselves in any kind of need.

I’ve known people like this, and so have you. People who have it all together and don’t need anything or anybody.

When I think about it in this way, it strikes me that a person who was born in a stable, laid in a feeding trough, and hung on a cross, would be offensive to that kind of attitude and mindset.

On the other hand, when we can be honest with ourselves and admit our need, we begin to discover what our Advent preparation is all about. We begin to discover that God draws near to us in a little child, and through that child takes up our lot in life so that we may know of God’s promise to *be with us* forever.

I’m glad that Matthew recorded John’s doubts and misgivings here. And I’m glad that we hear about it at this time of year. For it is during this time of year that I often feel stuck between God’s promises *made* and God’s promises *kept*. It’s at this time of year when I’m painfully aware that we are living between Christ’s first coming at Bethlehem and his second coming in glory. It’s at this time of year when I sometimes find myself disappointed in myself, the world, and even God.

If you’ve ever found yourself in a similar situation, take heart and hear this Good News. We may be disappointed with God, but *God is not disappointed with*

us, and comes to us anyway. He comes to help us in our weakness, to comfort us in our fear. For God does not come for the strong and the proud, but for the weak and the vulnerable.

As he paces in his dark cell, John hears a knock, then a voice. The voice says: “John, Jesus says to tell you that 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 does not take offense at him.”

I wonder if John “got” that. I wonder – will we?

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, we come as those who live *between* ancient promises *made* and promises *kept*. The bread and the wine are tangible symbols of those promises today, and they especially remind us that God comes to be *with us*, to help us and strengthen us while we wait.

So come with faith. Then rise up, and watch and wait his coming.

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