



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
3RD Sunday of Advent- December 15, 2019
“Are You the One?”
Sermon Text: Matthew 11:2-11

Can you imagine how John the Baptist felt? The bright light in the wilderness, crying, “Prepare the way!” Who boldly proclaimed that even stones would cry out in the presence of the Messiah. Now surrounded by the silent stone walls of a dark prison cell. Even in the womb, John had leapt for joy at the coming of One to usher in repentance and the victorious kingdom of the chosen people of Israel over their oppressors! One even stronger than I is coming! In people long waiting and long oppressed, all the pent up emotions are ready to burst forth. Finally!

But then Jesus comes and proclaims a different kingdom. Not like the Messiah John predicted. No fiery cosmic judgment, no vengeance and recompense. No marching into Jerusalem, just teaching and healing in small villages. He hasn't even protested over much less liberated John. “Cousin, did you forget about me? Am I wrong?”

John is not wrong about the Messiah, and he is not wrong about it being Jesus. But he hasn't grasped HOW this Messiah will save. Thinking “God wouldn't do it this way, John finds himself at the hinge between promise and fulfillment in confusion.

In Advent, the baby who will be Savior reminds us what His incarnation means. Jesus redefines greatness and resistance even, as service, not domination. Enacting God's will and justice and mercy is not simply trading who gets to dominate and oppress. As Jesus says, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Spoken not only to John, but to everyone who wonders, “Are you the One? Should I look for another?” The question John asks from prison is common to generations of Jesus' followers: how do we discern our Savior's presence when Jesus' work can be so different from our expectations?

Jesus quotes Isaiah's prophecy, “Go tell what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them.” Proclaiming the hoped for vision IS on the way, though not seen everywhere yet.

And Jesus speaks a blessing.

Blessed, are they who are not caused to stumble by my witness.

To John and anyone else who expects a different Messiah,

I imagine most of us have had moments where we wonder at Jesus too.

In truth, if we embrace Jesus' reality in its fullness, we will find that we will increasingly be asked us to stand in opposition to and in contrast with those reject Jesus' claims. The many who still prefer oppression, and domination. Who do not embrace wholeness for all. Who are happy with bending the world to their way. Or like those who came to see John, are looking for the latest flash in the pan. Always searching for another.

They who will tell us a different vision of God than the one made known in Christ. When our lives feel dark, we too may stumble.

Yet within all such places is good news.

The past and present are NOT the sum total of God's purposes for God's world. In our lives that's called grace.

Even as we wrestle with wanting a Savior "our way- with how the kingdom comes, with its timing, with who God loves. With struggling in being as open to God's future as God is open to us.

The kingdom IS even when we don't grasp it.

We are given this ongoing gift of God's saving presence for us continuing to dawn.

And we can take heart- that even Jesus' closest followers found themselves battling between "trust and obey" versus being worldly wise and touting self-reliance, skills or knowledge. Yet Jesus is with them.

We can take heart that in the face of John's disillusionment, Jesus does not respond with anger, but points to the light that is dawning. The highway of a beautiful kingdom being built. He responds to one poor in spirit with a blessing and a hope.

Jesus commanded John's disciples to go back to John because Jesus knew John needed a word to sustain him. John must have kept the faith, because if he had thrown up his hands at this would-be-Messiah, we would surely know. Those disciples go and tell words that blessed John's journey and broke through that prison cell. Broke through all the other words that denied the Messiah surrounding John.

One of the hymns that has grown in my appreciation over the years is "People Look East." The light of the sun dawns in the east.

People look east and sing today, love, the Lord is on the way."

"Love, the Lord is on the way" is not the fullest manifestation we desire, but the love of God's kingdom is real and is dawning still.

In her sermon, “the Gift of Disillusionment,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Blessed are those who do not let the Messiah they are expecting blind them to the Messiah who is standing right in front of them.”

Where love seems absent, struggles are real and expectations are unmet, Christ invites us to escape those places that blind us and bind us.

And look for the dawning of the kingdom.

The advent of Jesus invites us to encounter God’s saving presence and form a new community of hope, restoration and salvation.

It reminds me of Wayne and Nancy, who in their younger days had been a spark of life, with vibrant faith. Now Parkinson’s made Nancy’s body a prison and Wayne struggled with each breath. They were no longer in their home, hope for restoration had waned. They were disheartened. Wayne said he felt pretty sure he could make a break for it over the fence of the nursing home, oxygen tank and all. But he couldn’t leave Nancy behind and she’d be a drag in their escape. He would sit each day, coat on by the door of the facility plotting his liberation. Pretty grim days.

But then one day they went down for a meal and a flash mob appeared, of singing nurses’ aides dressed in holiday gear and the next thing you knew they had every one dancing and singing at least on the inside.

When Wayne and Nancy told it, you could see the joy radiate from their faces. It didn’t change the road they were on, it transformed that space for just awhile. And it restored their faith. Until God called them home.

In this season of Advent, as we recall with joy what God has done may we too hope in the truth that Jesus’ future advent is also certain, and that in the in-between, our servant Messiah dawns amidst faithfulness and failures, fears and hopes. Knowing such a new and redemptive space exists helps us remain steadfast and hopeful in all our in-betweens, where we, like John, find ourselves at the hinge between promise and fulfillment asking for a word to sustain us. May the glimmers of the dawning Messiah meet us right here and now. And may we share them. They may not always look like we expect, but the comforting and challenging, disturbing and inclusive, loving and healing presence of God comes.

We don’t have to search for another Savior. The One we need is here.